

‘I Went with What I Always Do . . .’: A Qualitative Analysis of ‘Cleggmania’ and Vote Choice in the 2010 British General Election

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We use focus group transcripts from the innovative Qualitative Election Study of Britain data set to provide insights into why ‘Cleggmania’ failed to translate into electoral success for the Liberal Democrats in 2010. Analyses conducted on participants’ vote choice stories indicate the effect of ‘Cleggmania’ was limited to strengthening the resolve of wavering Liberal Democrats. Long-time Labour and Conservative supporters who leaned Liberal Democrat before the election found their latent party identification made voting for a different party psychologically uncomfortable. Qualitative electoral research can advance our understanding of people’s voting calculus by analysing narratives for values, identity, utility maximising and constituency dynamics.

After campaign polls put their support as high as 31%, the Liberal Democrats¹ failed to increase their electoral vote share and seats in Westminster substantively on election day 2010 (BBC, 2010b). Using narrative and discourse analyses on the Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) data set we differentiate between those who cited a pre-election vote choice dilemma or not and those who, post-election, cited partisanship or strategic considerations in their vote choice. Through this typology we will show where Cleggmania succeeded and failed in converting individual support into Lib Dem votes. Our dilemma/partisanship structure identifies the values and identity-based accounts of stable voters who ‘started loyal and stayed loyal’, unaffected by Cleggmania. We reveal the psychological obstacles of undecided voters with prior party identities who

¹Henceforth, the Lib Dems.

‘dated Nick but didn’t stick’ with him and the narratives of undecided voters who were ‘won over’ to the Lib Dems.² Our second group includes three types of strategic voters: people who maximised their Lib Dem vote for either tactical, satisficing or principle/policy reasons.

This study makes two methodological contributions to electoral research. First we employ a unique data source: the transcripts of the 2010 QESB’s focus groups conducted across Britain pre- and post-election.³ This required innovation in data analysis; thus the second contribution is applying traditional qualitative analysis methods to British political behaviour. We address a gap in elections research by adding the missing piece: qualitative analysis. We will demonstrate that valuable insights, such as tactical voting motivations, can be discovered using qualitative approaches.

We provide a background to the 2010 election, including the first-ever leaders’ debates broadcasts. We then review explanations for the gap between the Lib Dems’ buoyant pre-election support and their disappointing electoral performance. The second section explains our data and methods of analysis and the findings from our narrative and discourse analyses, highlighting participants’ vote calculus. Finally, we triangulate our findings with the current attempts to explain the failure of Cleggmania. This research follows up on Catt’s (1996) challenge to the ‘orthodoxy of British electoral research’ and demonstrates that qualitative electoral data can provide invaluable insights into voting behaviour by questioning the assumptions and inferences made by experts and academics on why ordinary people vote as they do and shedding new light on the effect of partisanship and contextual factors such as constituency dynamics on vote choice. We conclude that research into QESB participants’ narratives reveals a complex calculus in vote choice that has not been recognised or examined adequately by quantitative electoral analysis. We recommend the use of qualitative research, in particular to better understand how voters think about their votes given their constituency dynamics.

1. Setting the scene: The campaign and debates

The election saw the first televised debates between the three major party leaders in Britain.⁴ David Cameron was expected to win in the debates given his background in public relations and greater ease in front of the camera in comparison with

²This category pays homage to the 2004 US Democratic primary’s ‘Dated Dean, Married Kerry’.

³The 2010 QESB is the only academically designed and publically available qualitative panel research conducted in England, Scotland and Wales during the UK national election.

⁴Each debate focused on specific themes in the first half—domestic affairs, foreign policy and the economy—and general issues in the second. The leaders responded to questions and also to each other, and a moderator chaired the proceedings. There was significant anticipation for the ‘Prime

Gordon Brown. Nick Clegg was the relatively unknown leader of the Liberal Democrats with his rhetoric of 'change' aimed at a populace disenchanted with British politics and politicians (BBC, 2010a; Blitz, 2010; Greenslade, 2010; The Telegraph, 2010).⁵ Tension in the campaigns was increased by the possibility of the first hung parliament since 1974, an outcome that 32% of voters favoured before the debates (White, 2010).⁶

The Lib Dems began the 2010 general election with 62 parliamentary seats having won 22% of the vote in 2005, the strongest Parliamentary presence since their Liberal Party predecessor in 1923 (Mellows-Facer, 2006, p. 13). In 2007 Clegg was elected party leader on a 'change' agenda directed at the two-party system. He aimed to widen the party's appeal to those voters with 'liberal values' but who did not vote Lib Dem (BBC, 2007). The party's response to the 2008 financial crisis and its lack of involvement in the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal shored up its credibility (BBC, 2010c). When the election campaign was launched on 6 April 2010, 17–21% of respondents expressed a Lib Dem vote preference (Populus, 2010; YouGov, 2010). However, Clegg's obscurity vanished overnight. The morning after the first debate the London media was dominated by the neologism 'Cleggmania' (inter alia: Hasan, 2010; Mayer, 2010; Sabloff, 2010).

2. Turning point: Cleggmania

Approximately 9.7 million people watched the first debate (Wring and Ward, 2010). Clegg had a strong first debate. His 'polished performance' helped him connect with voters unfamiliar with him and he positioned his party as a 'viable alternative to the "old parties"' (Quinn and Clements, 2011, p. 82; Wring, 2011, p. 2). Clegg's criticisms of the two major parties struck a positive chord with the respondents polled by Ipsos MORI (Allen *et al.*, 2011, p. 189). He came across as trustworthy and the leader who gave the least evasive answers (Lawes and Hawkins, 2011, pp. 68–70). QESB focus groups were conducted before and after each of the three debates. The transcripts captured QESB participants' reactions in real time.⁷ Participants reported positive reactions to Clegg's precision in answering

Ministerial' debates, one held each week in the 3 weeks preceding polling day (Allen *et al.*, 2011). For the history of the leaders' debates and televised debates, see inter alia Hook and Hitchens (2010).

⁵In a survey taken before the first debate around 44% believed David Cameron would perform best in the debates (only 13% predicted that of Nick Clegg) (Curtice, 2010).

⁶For a view of the role of hung parliaments in Britain before the 2010 coalition government see Kalitowski (2008).

⁷Participants did not watch post-debate coverage; therefore, we are confident their reactions are free from media effects. QESB transcripts are available at Winters (2011).

the questions and his polished first debate performance. Excerpt 1 contains the real-time reactions that we identify as driving ‘Cleggmania’ (Winters, 2011).⁸

2.1 Excerpt 1⁹

David: I felt the two people who had more gravitas were Gordon Brown and Cameron yet Nick Clegg seemed to have all the answers. He knew how he was going to pay things off. You know they were talking about deficits, this, that, and the other. They seemed to have worked out the budget, how they were going to afford this whereas Labour and Conservative weren’t disclosing that.

(Later)

Patricia: Actually I was really surprised about Nick Clegg. I thought he was the one who actually answered the questions more than anyone else did. He actually positively came out with what he was going to do, the numbers etc., whereas Cameron, really I was really looking forward to hearing him and he really disappointed me. I was very surprised.

Jane: I’m glad you said that ‘cause that was something I had forgotten but yes, he [Clegg] was definitely much more focused on the person who had asked the question and the question they had actually asked rather than just using it as an excuse to kind of say ‘ah, this is lovely but let me talk about health reform.’ . . .

Clegg transformed the Lib Dems into serious contenders in the eyes of the major parties, the media and potential voters.¹⁰ Lib Dem support rose from 17 to 31% (Lawes and Hawkins, 2011, p. 68) and there was speculation that they might overtake Labour as the main opposition party (Deacon and Wring, 2011, p. 287). This unprecedented boost was called the ‘Clegg effect’ or ‘Cleggmania’. It increased expectations for the Lib Dems’ electoral performance, presuming that the sections of the electorate enthused by the campaign would vote for them in unexpectedly large numbers (Allen *et al.*, 2011, p. 197).

This unexpected occurrence changed the Conservative and Labour strategy in subsequent debates. Allen *et al.* (2013, p. 110) document that, ‘Brown and Cameron had ignored Clegg in the first debate but turned their fire on him in the

⁸Most participants were undecided at the time of the debate.

⁹Participant details are anonymised. Conventions used: **inaudible words, *italic* font word guessed at, curly brackets {} sounds (e.g. laughter) and parentheses () breaks in time.

¹⁰Comparisons were made between Clegg and Che Guevara, Sir Winston Churchill and Barack Obama (Burkeman, 2010; Oliver and Smith, 2010).

second and third debates.' Although Cameron and Brown criticised the Lib Dems only hesitantly in the first debate (viewing them as irrelevant and/or potential coalition partners), Cameron became more critical of their policies while Brown employed a two-pronged approach: being complimentary whilst arguing that Lib Dem supporters should vote tactically for Labour (Allen *et al.*, 2011, pp. 189–193). Clegg's third debate performance was seen as repetitive and 'tired' and Cameron was judged the winner by a small but distinct margin (*ibid.*: 195). By the end of the campaign nine British Polling Council (BPC) polls reported that 26–29% of respondents stated a Lib Dem vote preference (Atkinson and Mortimore, 2011, p. 78).

3. The dilemma: Why did Cleggmania fail to convert support to votes?

The election results were disappointing for the Lib Dems; they won 23% of the vote, one point better than their 2005 share (*ibid.*). The BPC polls (excluding the three internet surveys) had overestimated the party's vote share by an average of 3.6% points (Kellner *et al.*, 2011, p. 95). Three accounts have been provided thus far to explain why Cleggmania failed to live up to expectations. The first posits 'the polls got it wrong', either because they measured support that did not exist or failed to measure declining support (*ibid.*, p. 78, pp. 81–91). The second account points to an over-emphasis of the leaders' debates effect while ignoring constraining factors such as the limited number of viable Lib Dem seats; this prevented translating a bounce into seats (Allen *et al.*, 2011; Johnston and Pattie, 2011a). Johnston and Pattie (2011a) showed the Lib Dems' constituency disadvantage: fewer marginal seats 'in play' and fewer resources to retain their marginal seats. The Lib Dems could only win 16 additional seats (lost in previous elections by less than 5%). It was not enough to make them national contenders. The authors conclude that Cleggmania did not help the Lib Dems win marginal seats because the party's pre-election planning was to retain seats won in the previous election (*ibid.*: 224–225, 232). When Cleggmania emerged they did not have a ground apparatus to transform new supporters into new voters.

A third account focuses on a lack of persuadable voters. Lawes and Hawkins (2011, pp. 66–68) argue the initial Lib Dem surge was rooted in an unstable coalition of respondents whose allegiance the party was unable to widen or consolidate. ComRes polls that tracked party support and voter preferences showed that although expressed voting intention for the Lib Dems rose from 21% before the first leaders' debate to 27% before the third one, the party was unable to capture the increased bastions of support or retain them after the first debate. Analysis of party support by pre-debate voting intention showed that over three-fourths of respondents who expressed allegiance to specific parties continued to support them after each debate. Additional support for the Lib Dems came largely from

the remaining one-fourth of supporters of the two major parties and a third of supporters of smaller parties. Similarly, [Allen et al. \(2011, p. 198\)](#) suggest that most voters would have decided their vote choice before watching the debates and Cleggmania could plausibly have affected only a small section of voters.¹¹ They suggest the apparent first debate surge could ‘well have been an artefact of media-priming effects and the tendency for people to say they would vote for the party whose leader they had been told had won the debate.’ The Lib Dems received the same three- to four-point campaign bounce in 2010 as they had in general election campaigns since 1997 (*ibid*). By this account, the leaders’ debates and campaign had no greater or lesser effect on Lib Dem support than prior campaigns.

4. Justification: Our data and methods

Several of the above accounts rely upon the inferences of experts or academics’ assumptions of what voters perceived or intended.¹² Our approach to the Cleggmania puzzle uses evidence that other accounts do not incorporate: the perceptions and self-reports of voters themselves. This allows both the cognitive and affective aspects of vote choice, often described in the values and norms of partisan identification, to emerge from the data. Partisan identification, as summarised by [Burden \(2008, p. 60\)](#), is a combination of ‘affect and cognition’. This combines the [Butler and Stokes’ \(1969, 1974\)](#) view that partisan identification represents an affective bond between voters and parties with research that highlighted the cognitive component of partisan identification ([Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1977; Lodge and Hamill, 1986](#)).¹³

The use of pre- and post-election focus group data is unique in the extant British vote choice literature. Our approach has implications for the hypothesised effects of ‘voter characteristics’ on the cost–benefit calculations of vote choice and the propensity for voters to vote sincerely or strategically ([Kedar, 2012, pp. 551–552](#)). We redress this methodological gap in British electoral research by using qualitative data and methods to make visible people’s particular vote choice dilemmas, partisan identification, strategic voting, and the norms and values voters draw upon as we explore Cleggmania’s impact (or not) on QESB voters. Qualitative data allows

¹¹In 2010, 43% of respondents reported making up their minds during the campaign, higher than the reported figure for the 2005 election. For voters interested in the debates, [Allen et al. \(2011, p. 198\)](#) claim the leaders did not offer clear substantive policy messages that simplified vote choice. Moreover, barring the first debate, there were ‘no knockout blows’ that produced a clear winner.

¹²Indeed, as Catt’s critique suggests, the tendency of researchers to ‘presume to “explain” the reasoning of voters[,] . . . assume that [they] share the analysts’ own “objective” recognition of the true position[,] . . . seem unwilling to believe the voters[,] . . . or be] condescending in their acceptance of voters’ views’ continues almost two decades later (1996, pp. 32–33).

¹³See also [Campbell et al.](#) for a view of partisan identification as ‘the individual’s affective orientation to an important group object in his environment’, (1960, p. 121).

researchers to examine the British election as self-reflexively understood by the participants. The QESB provides high-quality pre- and post-election panel data to analyse 'how people use language in their everyday interactions, their 'discourses' with each other and how they . . . put their linguistic skills to use in building specific accounts of events' (Burr, 2003, p. 17). We examined the post-election transcripts from focus groups conducted between 18 and 24 May 2010 in England (Essex and London), Scotland (Glasgow) and Wales (Aberystwyth) for participants' vote choice stories and related asides.¹⁴ During the focus groups participants were invited to recount the lead up to election day and if, and for whom they voted.¹⁵ Focus groups are not as in-depth as one-on-one interviews but they facilitate the gathering of rich data from many people (in this case 30 voters from across Britain).¹⁶ Such data lend themselves to thematic organisation and we applied narrative analysis and discourse analysis to the stories, respectively.¹⁷

We believe that the data produced through the QESB are methodologically valid (i.e. our data and findings represent something in the world accurately). Our working assumption for this research was that participants knew how they had voted and they would construct their stories both to recount and to explain (justify) their actions. Our analysis makes visible the narrative structure of people's stories and the values, norms or ideas they cited; the analysis aggregates these factors to see how they interact. The analysis is not vertical (insights into one person), but rather horizontal (norms and values common across people). We seek, not to capture one participant's vote choice thought process perfectly, but rather the common values and norms Britons draw upon to communicate their vote choice. An analogy could be, if someone were to relate a poker game story, he might not convey all the details perfectly but his account will reflect the accepted rules and values of the game. Which parts he focuses on—bluffing, tells, 'upping the ante'—reveals how he understands the game. If he relates something in contradiction to that discourse he will appear to others to not understand how poker is played.

¹⁴Seventy-six participants took part in 14 pre- and post-election focus groups. Participants were recruited through email advertising and snowballing referrals and screened by age, sex and voting intention to ensure the sample was representative on these criteria. Most pre-election participants were undecided voters. Forty people participated in the post-election groups, 30 of whom voted. In this article, we analyse only these post-election focus groups as they provide us with the data needed to examine participants' vote choice.

¹⁵Vote choice reporting was voluntary as ethical principles preclude requiring someone to reveal the content of their secret ballot.

¹⁶For more on construction of the QESB research design see [Winters and Carvalho \(forthcoming\)](#).

¹⁷Qualitative analysis processes data iteratively, bringing out information in each new wave until reaching theoretical saturation and ' . . . further coding, enrichment of categories, and so on no longer provide or promise new knowledge' (Flick, 2009, p. 312).

Given this, we propose two possible approaches to these data: a charitable view and a sceptical view. The charitable view, which we adhere to, would see these data as more or less reflecting participants' sincerely held views, stipulating both social desirability and people's tendency for cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957).¹⁸ A sceptical view would see the data as constructed accounts that do not accurately reflect people's prior thought processes or views. In both cases, the narratives remain attempts to communicate one's attitudes and actions in a way others would find rational and convincing (even if that person voted for a different party). Even taking up a sceptical view of these narratives, it must still be acknowledged that the participants drew upon the shared political norms and values of British democracy in their accounts. Our analysis, therefore, was constructed to find the broader patterns in the values and norms across stories of participants within different constituency dynamics, holding different partisan identifications, and from three nations.¹⁹

In the first wave of analysing the post-election transcripts, we did a close reading of each vote choice story using narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a holistic approach that preserves the context and particularity of the data (Riessman, 1993). Stories have a narrative order that describe a tension or an unexpected event that requires reaction and/or adjustment (Riessman, 2008).²⁰ People's stories draw upon their subjective experiences and provide insights into their concepts of identity and self (Smith, 2000). Narrative analysis examines how the story teller interprets things (Bruner, 1990). The QESB vote choice stories contained elements of the dramatic arc plus additional ones.²¹ We identified the following narrative elements:

- (i) *Scene setting*: narrative introduction/background;
- (ii) *Dilemma*: a dilemma or complicating factor;
- (iii) *Turning point*: event(s) important to heighten/resolve the dilemma(s);
- (iv) *Resolution*: dilemma's resolution;
- (v) *Justification*: explanations or rationalisation;
- (vi) *Outcome*: the final outcome;

¹⁸Cognitive dissonance is the unpleasant feeling that comes when our beliefs, decisions and actions are inconsistent.

¹⁹In doing so, we take into account the 'choice, constraints and context' relevant to our participants' voting behaviour (Lupia *et al.*, 2000).

²⁰Franzosi (1998, p. 521) notes '[T]he temporal ordering of events in a story is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a story. The events in the sequence must be bound together by some principles of logical coherence'.

²¹Introduction/exposition—main characters and scene are set; inciting incident—problem or conflict is introduced; rising action—intensity increases; climax—turning point, the situations changes; falling action—difficulties are confronted and overcome; resolution/denouement—remaining issues are reconciled (MacEwan, 1900; Ohler, 2008).

- (vii) *Reflections*: further thoughts;
- (viii) *Coda*: a short restatement (may include a verbal link to the past or present).

We re-read the transcripts to identify the temporal ordering of events and logical coherence in 30 vote choice stories and identified elements within each, for example:²²

Original text:

Diane: I didn't know who I was going to vote for. I liked the Lib Dems and thought – is it going to be a wasted vote? Then I saw the debate, which was here, and that made up my mind really who I did want to vote for which was Lib Dem . . .

Narrative analysis applied:

Diane: [**Dilemma**] I didn't know who I was going to vote for. [**Dilemma**] I liked the Lib Dems and thought – is it going to be a wasted vote? [**Turning point**] Then I saw the debate, which was here, [**Resolution**] and that made up my mind really who I did want to vote for which was Lib Dem . . .

We then undertook a close reading of the stories and characterised each element's content using a form of discourse analysis. Guided by Gee's (2008, pp. 9–13) principles of discourse analysis, we analysed how participants used language to make things significant (or not); to enact identities; the social goods they communicated and how they (dis)connected ideas or things to make them relevant or irrelevant to each other. The individual elements were often coded *in vivo*, leaving the original wording to retain specific values, rationales and justifications while remaining sensitive to common themes across stories.²³ This is an example of the finished coding:

Diane: [**Dilemma: Undecided**] I didn't know who I was going to vote for. [**Dilemma: A wasted vote?**] I liked the Lib Dems and thought – is it going to be a wasted vote? [**Turning point: Saw debate**] Then I saw the debate, which was here, [**Resolution: Will vote Lib Dem**] and that made up my mind really who I did want to vote for which was Lib Dem . . .

As we were interested in what the tellers were communicating the narratives were examined for patterns in the story structures and value themes.²⁴ In this fourth

²²Not all narratives contain each element listed and some include the same element multiple times.

²³*In vivo* codes use the language of respondents to preserve a particular meaning and/or the significance in a setting (Gibbs and Taylor, 2010).

²⁴We call an individual's unanalysed account 'a (vote choice) story', we use 'narrative structure' when referring to the coded version.

Table 1 Partisanship/dilemma types

| Dilemma (pre) | | No | Yes |
|---------------------|-----|-----------------|--|
| Partisanship (post) | Yes | 1. Stayed loyal | 2. Dated Nick, didn't stick |
| | No | (Unobserved) | 3(a) Won over 3(b) Strategic voters: Tactical, Satisfying, Policy/Principle |

wave of data analysis distinct themes emerged: pre-election vote choice dilemmas (yes or no) and post-election explanations that included partisanship or not. Using a deductive approach this becomes a 2 × 2 pre-election dilemma and post-election partisanship frame (Table 1).²⁵ Four types emerged from inductive analysis but not in the categories deductive reasoning would predict.²⁶ Conforming to prediction, participants without a pre-election vote choice dilemma and cited partisanship post-election as their justification for voting are labelled ‘Stayed loyal’. There were no stories observed in the ‘no dilemma, no partisanship’ category most likely due to the exclusion of non-voters at the recruitment stage. Those who had a dilemma but remained loyal to their identification are labelled ‘Dated Nick, didn’t stick’ voters. Inductive data methods indicate two distinct narrative structures in the stories of people who had a dilemma and did not cite partisanship in their account: those who were ‘won over’ to the Lib Dems and those who voted for them for strategic (rather than partisan identification) reasons. We review these in turn.

5. Outcome: The narrative types

5.1 *Stayed loyal*

Some participants knew how they would vote before the election started. The QESB data included eight such participants: two Labour, two Conservative, two Lib Dem, one Green and one Plaid Cymru. We include examples in Excerpt 2. The coded narrative structures are listed in Table 2.²⁷

²⁵Alternatively, if this were principle-components analysis, we would expect a four factor solution that captures the underlying latent concepts. Our thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for helping us further clarify this typology.

²⁶The remaining narratives were assigned the category ‘Other’ and were excluded from the analysis. Individuals who reported not voting were excluded and one undecided participant who voted Conservative for policy reasons, although he would fit within ‘principle/policy’. One participant who voted Lib Dem because ‘everyone else was doing it’ was excluded.

²⁷Only selected excerpts are included; full transcripts are available online.

5.1.1 Excerpt 2

John (Labour):²⁸ I voted first in '79 which was Labour, which was influenced through a trade unionist father really and then there was Thatcher of course {laughing} which can only strengthen my convictions and that's the way it's been ever since. So I walked in knowing full well where I was going.

Jody (Conservative):²⁹ And there was absolutely no way I was going to vote Labour and so I voted Conservative. That was the party I was going to vote for, always, you know.

Helen (Lib Dem):³⁰ Well it was kind of easy for me because in my constituency we've had a Lib Dem majority for years and years – it's Ed Davey—and he won again and he's done some good work in our constituency so it was easy for me.

Conservative and Labour voters' personal history or values ('a trade unionist father', 'support my country', 'seems more positive') are cited in their explanations of vote choice. These themes of personal values and identity are also found in the 'Dated Nick' respondents' justifications for returning to their prior party, the difference being that 'Stayed Loyal' voters never considered voting for another party. The Lib Dem voters in this category provide different justifications from

Table 2 'Stayed loyal' narrative structures

| | |
|---------------|--|
| John (Lab) | O: knew who to vote for, Ss: personal history, J: trade unionist family, J: Thatcher, J: Labour ever since, C: walked in knowing |
| Geoff (Lab) | O: voted Labour, J: Labour from start |
| Jody (Con) | J: Brown's failings, J: waste in public sector, Ss: no way vote Labour, O: voted Con, J: always going to vote Con |
| Anthony (Con) | O: voted Tory, J: Tory supporter, Ss: no problem to put the 'X', J: campaigned for them |
| George (PC) | J: support my country, J: policies I agree with, J: looking after vulnerable, O: it didn't go our way |
| Rita (Green) | Ss: Green involvement, O: vote Green, J: shift in politics, J: seems more positive |
| Helen (LD) | Ss: was easy for me, J: Lib Dem majority, J: MP did good work, C: easy for me |
| Andrea (LD) | O: voted Lib Dem, Ss: never wavered, D: tired after work, seat so safe, a wasted vote? C: but I voted |

Source: (Winters, 2011). Codes: Ss, scene setting; D, dilemma; J, justification; O, outcome; C, coda.

²⁸Essex Post 1 (Winters, 2011).

²⁹Essex Post 2 (Winters, 2011).

³⁰London Post (Winters, 2011).

other partisans. They do not cite values or identity, but instead mention constituency dynamics in their narratives. Across all the post-election vote choice stories we examined, Lib Dem narratives were the most likely to feature constituency dynamics.

5.2 *Dated Nick, didn't stick*

Five voters, two prior Labour voters and three Conservative voters, were undecided at the pre-election focus groups. They considered voting Lib Dem, but ultimately voted for their usual party. We provide excerpts and the narrative structures (Excerpt 3 and Table 3).

5.2.1 *Excerpt 3*

Roger (Labour):³¹ There's elements of my situation which mirror the same sort of pattern in that it was a decision between Labour and the Liberal Party and as a long-term Labour voter I wasn't used to having to face a decision on that course so much I ended up choosing Labour . . . And it really came down to, literally, the ballot box and it came to the point of 'How will I feel when I see the results come in'?

Cathy (Conservative):³² Although I was undecided when it came to the focus group, I had thought possibly, I'd always voted Conservative and I thought probably would do that again but I could have been swayed I liked Nick Clegg on all of the debates, I watched all of them, and I live in a really strong Conservative constituency and I knew they'd get in again and when it came down to it and I went to put my cross in the box

Table 3 'Dated Nick, didn't stick' narrative structures

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Ida (Lab) | D: Lab/LD, O: voted Labour, J: my preferred party |
| Roger (Lab) | Ss: Lab/LD, D: not used to decisions, O: voted Labour, Tp: how will I feel? |
| Cathy (Con) | D: undecided, Ss: always voted Con, D: could have been swayed, D: liked Clegg, D: strong Con constituency, D: had to decide, O: voted Con, J: always voted that way |
| Shirley (Con) | Ss: was going to vote LD, Ss: family Tory, Ss: always voted Tory, Ss: give LD a chance, Tp: LD won't get in, Tp: Tory guys outside, O: voted Con, Res: LD won't do it, I'll vote Tory |
| Patricia (Con) | Ss: open-minded, Ss: Clegg good in debate, D: lost confidence in Clegg, Res: examine leaders, J: Gordon had his chance J: went for best leader |

Source: (Winters, 2011). Codes: Ss, scene setting; D, dilemma; Tp, turning point; Res, resolution; J, justification; O, outcome.

³¹London Post (Winters, 2011).

³²Essex Post 1 (Winters, 2011).

I looked at Lib Dem and I looked at Conservative and I went with what I always do which is Conservative because I just couldn't, I don't know, just something in me was just like 'I've always voted that way' and probably will always continue to.

Shirley (Conservative):³³ Yeah, I was going to go with the Lib Dems actually. My family have always been Tory and I've always gone with what they were, and I thought I'd go for the Lib Dems, give them a chance sort of thing... but on the day I thought – they're never going to get in. So I waited for my husband to get home, we both went and I still wasn't sure, and we got there and the Tory guys were outside, so I walked up and put my cross straight away, and – Tories. In the end, yeah I thought I don't think they're going to do it so I'll just vote Tory.

In contrast to the 'Stayed Loyal' voters, these stories relate psychological dilemmas and their resolutions. They start with setting scenes or the dilemma of being undecided. Two voters report this tension extended late into the campaign: Roger and Shirley report being undecided as they walked up to/into the voting booth. Important insights are found in voters' justifications. Participants relate emotional explanations ('How will I feel when I see the results come in?') and the desire for cognitive consistency ('I just couldn't, I don't know, just something in me was just like "I've always voted that way"'). These voters resolved their psychological dilemmas by remaining cognitively consistent and returning to their party of long-term identification.³⁴ From this we conclude that the partisan identity of the participants overrode reasons to vote Lib Dem.

These data provide direct evidence for a new account explaining the overestimation of Lib Dem support in the polls: some people may have sincerely thought they would vote Lib Dem and then could not. Shirley and Roger are examples of people who, if surveyed, could have reported a Lib Dem voting intention on the day of the election. Yet when confronted with the act of voting both cast their votes for the party they had always supported. We consider this key evidence and another piece of the Cleggmania puzzle. Our analysis suggests that voting carries a unique psychological weight that cannot be captured in pre-election survey questionnaires or laboratory experiments but can be identified using qualitative research. This explanation could be retroactively applied to the phenomenon

³³Essex Post 2 (Winters, 2011).

³⁴These participants, as do those who voted strategically, highlight the importance of taking into account the extent to which a voter can 'live with' her voting decision in addition to the national issues, party contests and constituency dynamics (Catt, 1996, p. 45).

known as the ‘spiral of silence’ or ‘shy Tories’ that has been used to account for why pollsters got the results of the 1992 general election wrong (see [Jowell et al., 1993](#)). Survey research has explained the reason for the polls misjudging Tory support as a failure of voters who went for the Conservative party in that election to reveal their true vote preference to the pollsters. However, our analysis of Cleggmania suggests that these voters could have given pollsters their sincere preferences and then behaved differently on polling day.

Next we take up the two types of vote choice narratives that emerged from participants who had a pre-election dilemma but did not give a partisanship explanation for their Lib Dem vote. These people were either ‘won over’ to the Lib Dems or had strategic considerations.

5.3 *Won over*

The ‘Won Over’ voters’ narratives mirror ‘Dated Nick’ voters except in their justifications. ‘Won Over’ voters do not report the cognitive dissonance dilemmas seen above. Instead they cite their agreement with Lib Dem principles and/or being impressed with Nick Clegg. Two participants mention the debates as turning points in their decision-making; two others cite constituency dynamics. Worries about casting a wasted vote or their vote not meaning much also featured in these stories. These voters were ‘won over’ in that something overcame their ‘wasted vote’ concerns to vote Lib Dem (See Excerpt 4 and Table 4).

5.3.1 *Excerpt 4*

Nicole:³⁵ I still hadn’t really decided until I turned up at the polling station, but I voted for the Liberal Democrats and I live in a very, very safe Tory seat. So I really knew my vote wasn’t going to mean very much but I agree with their principles, I like the candidate I just wanted to show my support and just place the vote where I wanted it even though I knew it wouldn’t do anything.

Diane:³⁶ I didn’t know who I was going to vote for. I liked the Lib Dems and thought – is it going to be a wasted vote? Then I saw the debate, which was here, and that made up my mind really who I did want to vote for which was Lib Dem.

We conclude that the debates and Cleggmania shored up support with these wavering and leaning voters. That the Lib Dems increased their 2010 vote share by one

³⁵Essex Post 2 ([Winters, 2011](#)).

³⁶Essex Post 1 ([Winters, 2011](#)).

Table 4 'Won over' narrative structures

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Nicole (LD) | D: undecided, O: voted LD, Ss: safe Tory seat, D: vote won't mean much, J: agreed with LD principles, J: liked Clegg, J: show of support |
| Diane (LD) | D: undecided, D: wasted vote? Tp: leaders' debate, Res: made up my mind, O: voted LD |
| Stacey (LD) | D: undecided, Ss: not Tories, Tp: leader' debate, Tp: impressed with Clegg, Ss: considered Labour, J: constituency dynamics, O: voted LD, Ref: didn't make a difference |
| Ian (LD) | O: voted LD, J: I agreed with them, J: not Brown, J: Dad's influence, J: not Cameron |
| Nathan (LD) | O: voted LD, Ss: happy about debates, J: disillusioned, J: not Labour or Tories, J: LD hype, Tp: could vote and not waste it |

Source: (Winters, 2011). Codes: Ss, scene setting; D, dilemma; Tp, turning point; Res, resolution; J, justification; O, outcome.

point may be down to Cleggmania converting such wavering and leaning supporters into votes.

5.4 Strategic voters

'Strategic' voters are unique in that these voters consider the costs and benefits given their constituency dynamics. Their structured stories assume the norm of voting as an act that maximises their personal views or a politically preferable outcome.³⁷ Johnston and Pattie (2011b) examined 2010 BES data for tactical voting given local contexts. They conclude (in part) that people voted tactically if their preferred party attachments were relatively weak, if they had confidence in their second-preference party, and where they thought it could win. Our findings map onto some of their conclusions, but provide richer voting calculus data rather than inferences drawn from statistical patterns.³⁸ Our analysis revealed multiple motivations for the same act of tactical voting and we feel an important contribution is its differentiation between three types of strategic voters: (i) tactical: voted Lib Dem to stop another party from winning, (ii) satisficing: preferred a marginal party, but voted Lib Dem to support a viable and still political proximal party and (iii) principle/policy: express support for electoral reform or a policy (usually proportional representation). The first two fit neatly into the quantitative conclusion of Johnston and Pattie (2011b), the third does not.

³⁷In political science, most rational choice theory has focused on whether or not the act of voting is 'rational' (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968).

³⁸Johnston and Pattie's (2011b) analysis focused on tactical voters. Their first dataset was composed of BES self-reported tactical voters (using a question on vote choice reasons) plus a second dataset comparing the party that respondents listed as first on an AV ballot against the party they reported voting for.

5.4.1 *Excerpt 5*

5.4.1.1 *Tactical voter*

Kevin:³⁹ I voted Lib Dem to keep the Tories out. Never again in my lifetime, I'll never vote Lib Dem again. I've cut off my nose to spite my face; they'll never get my vote ever again.

5.4.1.2 *Satisficing voters*

Harry:⁴⁰ Well, I was thinking of voting Lib Dem and then because mainly I think their manifesto agreed with my ideals most and then there was some thoughts of you know, who would be best for Scotland, possibly the SNP would be but I think after looking at the statistics for our constituency, it's a Labour stronghold and pretty much Labour are going to get it and I thought the Lib Dems, overall, fitted me more. Then I thought, you know it's not going to count in my constituency but they're going for PR.

Matthew:⁴¹ No, but I did [vote Lib Dem] not for it being the first choice but by deciding the others I didn't want – given the choice I'd have voted Green but that was a wasted vote because that wasn't going to get me anywhere. I grew up under Thatcher so I've never voted Conservative and I didn't want Gordon Brown in again, so I was left with the Lib Dems. They were the closest I would have got to some of the Green views.

5.4.1.3 *Principle/policy voter*

Lyle:⁴² Yeah. I voted for kind of the same reason as Alice like I was a more a strategic voter, because I knew like, I thought the Lib Dems would have a better chance of having a long-term impact. And I mean like they're more for proportional representation I'm trying, so I'm basically looking at the long term to see where my vote is going.

Two people voted tactically (against the Conservatives rather than) for the Lib Dems, a decision both came to regret given the coalition government. 'Satisficers' (as per [Johnston and Pattie, 2011b](#)) report voting Lib Dems as they were politically viable and political proximal to their views although they preferred or held another party identification. The third group cited a policy or principle as their justification.

³⁹Essex Post 2 ([Winters, 2011](#)).

⁴⁰Essex Post 2 ([Winters, 2011](#)).

⁴¹Scotland Post ([Winters, 2011](#)).

⁴²Wales Post ([Winters, 2011](#)).

Why classify these voters as strategic instead of expressive? The evidence is in the stories themselves. Unlike strong partisans who express their views through their identity, these voters describe their vote as part of a strategic goal. As Keith says, 'I definitely want to see Labour in again in my lifetime . . . [the Lib Dems] want to get a 3-party system going . . . I didn't vote for a short-term government I voted for a chance of some sort of ideal.'⁴³ Peter also indicated he valued a systemic change: ' . . . what concerned me and had concerned me for a long time is, the unfairness of the system, we have this two-party system.'⁴⁴ Lyle too, speaks of his long-term perspective on the use of his vote: 'I thought the Lib Dems would have a better chance of having a long-term impact . . . even though you shouldn't vote strategically I think that by voting for the Liberal Democrats, at least in the future you won't possibly have to vote strategically.'⁴⁵ We would argue there is a qualitative difference between voting as an expression of values at that moment and seeing one's vote as a movement in a larger political plan to bring about institutional change. Our understanding is this is a distinct set of values based in strategic goal-seeking that contrasts with expressive values of partisan post-election or 'Won Over' voters' justifications (Tables 5–7).

6. Reflections and coda

The televised leaders' debates debuted to fanfare and, by most accounts, provided a public platform for the 'third party' to introduce its policies and leader to the British public. The hype surrounding Cleggmania reached unprecedented heights following the first debate (Lawes and Hawkins, 2011, p. 68). The failure of the Lib Dems to transform their electoral prospects into electoral success left many people befuddled. The QESB transcripts and our analysis shed new light on this puzzle by illuminating how Cleggmania operated in the thoughts and calculations of ordinary voters.

As to the validity of our findings we seek to meet the criteria of Riessman (1993, pp. 65–8) in terms of persuasiveness—the data and our analysis are persuasive; correspondence—the theories we produce match the data; and usefulness—our findings can be useful to future research. Further, we can triangulate our conclusions to augment the other accounts of Cleggmania's failure. The first explanation was a survey-based account of why Cleggmania failed to produce expected results: 'the polls got it wrong' either because they measured support that did not exist or failed to measure a decline in support (Atkinson and Mortimore, 2011, p. 78). Our results provide insight into the psychological obstacle of voting for

⁴³Essex Post 2 (Winters, 2011).

⁴⁴Essex Post 1 (Winters, 2011).

⁴⁵Wales Post (Winters, 2011).

Table 5 'Tactical' narrative structures

| | |
|------------|---|
| Kevin (LD) | O: voted LD, J: Tories out, Ref: never again |
| David (LD) | O: voted LD, J: LD landslide, Ref: regret, Ref: tactical vote misjudged, J: didn't want Labour in, J: but not a Con majority |

Table 6 'Satisficing' narrative structures

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Harry (LD) | Ss: maybe vote LD, J: manifesto agreed, D: best for Scotland, Tp: Labour stronghold, J: LD fitted more, J: my vote won't count, J: LD going for PR |
| Matthew (LD) | O: voted LD, J: process of elimination, Ss: wanted Green, J: a wasted vote? J: not Tories, J: not Brown, Res: left with LD, J: closest to Green |
| Arthur (LD) | O: voted LD, J: agreed with policies the most, J: leftish and PR |
| Heather (LD) | Ss: set on voting LD, Ss: had voted SNP, D: couldn't see the point, Tp: LD moment, J: polls, Ss: internet research, D: should vote Green, D: no Green/socialist options, Res: stuck with LD |

Table 7 'Principle/policy' narrative structures

| | |
|------------|---|
| Peter (LD) | D: vote or not? J: unfair system, Tp: something might happen, Res: vote LD, J: good MP, J: closest to my politics, J: change unfair system, C: pushed me to vote |
| Lyle (LD) | J: I was a strategic voter, J: better long-term impact, J: more for PR, C: long-term impact |
| Keith (LD) | O: voted LD, Ref: strategic alliance, J: LD want 3-party system, J: voted for 3-party system, J: voted for an ideal |

Source: (Winters, 2011). Codes: Ss, scene setting; D, dilemma; Tp, turning point; Res, resolution; J, justification; O, outcome; Ref, reflections; C, coda.

another party given a previous partisan identification. Our evidence-based account suggests there were people who considered voting Lib Dem but when faced with the ballot found it difficult to vote against their traditional party. A portion of the 3.6% error in the pre-election polls may have been down to people honestly reporting a Lib Dem vote intention in a survey but then did not (or could not) follow through in the voting booth. The psychological elements of voting may also explain why voters who didn't profess a vote preference for the Tories in the 1992 general election ended up voting for them. Contrary to accepted explanations that these voters were 'shy' or 'silent' about expressing who they would vote for, our analysis of 'dated Nick' voters suggests that long-term partisans who sincerely profess an undecided status or who lean toward a different party in a survey cannot be assumed to follow through on that declaration when faced with casting their ballot, either by not voting or voting for another party.

The next account in the literature cited an over-emphasis on the effect of the leaders' debates by the media while ignoring the limited number of viable seats Lib Dems could win (Allen *et al.*, 2011; Johnston and Pattie, 2011a; Lawes and Hawkins, 2011). We found extensive evidence that constituency dynamics played an important role in people's vote decision. Of the 30 vote stories we analysed, 17 include constituency dynamics in the narrative. The evidence provides rich, context-informed insight into constituency considerations, such as where parties are concentrated or the number of marginal seats 'in play' (Atkinson and Mortimore, 2011; Johnston and Pattie, 2011a). QESB participants detail how they made decisions within the confines of their own constituency dynamics. For instance, those who expressed a strong partisanship were unlikely to mention 'wasted' votes. The vote choice stories that most often contextualised constituency dynamics and/or cited concerns about a wasted vote were those of Lib Dem voters. These complex and constrained calculations cannot be captured by a one-size-fits-all vote choice model using survey data. We recommend that future qualitative research projects be undertaken to better understand constituency-level dynamics and its impact on the voting calculus.

The last account cited a lack of persuadable voters available to the Lib Dems. Lawes and Hawkins (2011, pp. 66–8) argued the initial Lib Dem surge was rooted in an unstable coalition of respondents whose allegiance the party was unable to widen or consolidate. Our analyses identified several participants for whom the debates and Cleggmania shored up their wavering support and converted them into 'won over' voters. Lawes and Hawkins (*ibid*) also described support for the Lib Dems as coming from supporters of each of the two major parties and supporters from smaller parties. We add to this account by identifying the vote choice stories of strategic, satisficing, and principle/policy voters who saw a vote for the Lib Dems as a way to maximise their utility on a personal level. Further, we saw the Lib Dems unable to convince long-time Labour and Conservative participants to abandon their party identification at the ballot box.

Our analysis also provides a response to a hypothesis proposed by Kedar (2012, pp. 551–552) concerning the factors that affect strategic voting and this has implications for measuring tactical voting in the British Election Study. We find evidence in support of the proposition that partisans are less likely to vote strategically. However, our analysis of the 'Stayed loyal' voters highlights important variation in how voters of different parties speak about party identification. Conservative, Labour and small party voters were more likely to justify their choice by citing their values than Lib Dem voters. We suggest the British Election Study (and future research) investigate the proposition that different parties shape partisan identity differently. The 'dated Nick' voters suggest that while they may initially be open to vote for another party, their prior party identification makes the psychological cost of casting a vote that violates their previous identity quite high. Further,

we also observed that non-partisans can be ‘won over’ and can vote sincerely for a party.

If partisans are *less* likely to vote strategically then by logical necessity non-partisans are *more* likely to vote strategically. In partial agreement with [Johnston and Pattie \(2011b\)](#), we find evidence that ‘strategic voters’ did not divulge any strong party identification and were undecided before the election. The QESB strategic voters worked to keep another party out and voted for more viable parties that were political proximal; however, there is evidence that three voters placed their votes tactically to express a desire for institutional change. Therefore, our second suggestion for the British Election Study is to formulate survey questions that can examine the vote choices with the specific aim of uncovering underlying values, norms and factors that affect the multiple constructions of sincere and strategic voting.

Qualitative research provides the space and human interactions that enable, as we argue, more complete and accurate insights into complicated vote choice calculations. High-quality qualitative electoral data and applying rigorous methods of analysis allowed us to identify new answers to the Cleggmania puzzle that are grounded in the evidence of real voters’ stories. Although these individual stories cannot be generalised they have the benefit of being direct evidence rather than expert inferences about what might have happened. Finally, the thought processes of average people cannot be captured in survey data or through the artificial setting of a laboratory where simulated voting does not carry the same commitment as an actual vote in a real election. We recommend an expanded use of qualitative analysis in conjunction with quantitative and experimental research to triangulate British electoral behaviour research. As we have demonstrated, a key component in understanding people’s vote choices is to let them speak in their own words.

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