

The Coalition Agreement: Who Won?

The Verdict of the Content Analyses

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ABSTRACT

The 2010 general election resulted in the first peacetime coalition government at Westminster since the 1930s. The goal of this paper is to assess whether the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats have gained (or lost) most from the agreement. 'Gained' and 'lost' here both have very specific meanings since they are based on comparisons of party positions as set out in their respective manifestos with the position of the new government set out in the coalition agreement. In global terms we find that the coalition agreement is nearer to the Liberal Democrats' left-right position than the Conservatives'. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis of policy areas identifies several policy areas where the Conservatives gained more. Overall, both parties managed to secure considerable gains on their own priority policies.

The general election of 6 May 2010 produced the first hung parliament since February 1974 and it resulted in the first peacetime coalition since the National government in the 1930s. The 2010 coalition between the whole of the Conservative party led by David Cameron and the whole of the Liberal Democratic Party led by Nick Clegg was based on a coalition agreement that was thrashed out in detailed negotiations between the parties over a period of five days immediately after the election. The broad terms of this agreement were initially outlined in a draft document published on 12 May and the full details later outlined in a 36-page coalition agreement. The agreement has become the touchstone for all government policy since that date.

The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had fought the election on the basis of manifestos published during the election campaign. These documents were launched at the start of the campaigns and were lauded, attacked and defended during four weeks of campaigning. Although the campaign contained more than its fair share of innovation, with the first televised leaders' debates, the manifestos loomed large over the campaign.

The manifesto is a profoundly important document for political parties. It reflects a party's core values, internal compromises on matters of great importance and the primary campaign tool. It is hardly surprising that some prominent members of both parties felt that they had much to lose from entering into an agreement that would necessarily involve compromising on cherished policy positions.

Clearly a significant number of people in both parties felt that their party had given too much away in the negotiations and felt let down. These feelings are politically important because if they grow and become more widely accepted they may eventually undermine the coalition. The problem with such assessments from a more scientific perspective, however, is that they are inevitably biased by the preoccupations of individuals. Political activists who eat, sleep and breathe politics often lack a degree of objectivity in their assessments. Since the precise wording of commitments matter even minor differences in emphasis or wording can assume great importance and be blown up out of proportion. The purpose of this paper is to provide a sober and objective assessment of how much both sides got from the agreement by comparing the content of coalition agreement with the content of the parties' manifestos. We use the same methods of content analysis that have been applied to the party manifestos to the coalition agreement and compare these three documents. We do not pretend, of course, that this approach is the only way of assessing who won or lost in the negotiations but the methodology is transparent, the analysis is objective and the study replicable.

Documents, Manifestos, Coalition Agreements

Words are the raw material of politics. They are what politicians live and die by. Words in written agreements are especially important since they represent unambiguous evidence of agreement. In politics, again as in life, the written word has enormous evidential value. It signals real intent since failure to perform is taken as a grave matter. Gentlemen's agreements, informal understandings and even solemn and binding commitments do not carry the same weight as written agreements. The world of politics places particular importance on documents: constitutions, treaties and written agreements. That may have something to do with the legal training that many politicians go through. In English law most contracts can be oral but all young lawyers have the words 'get it in writing' engraved into their souls.

Manifestos are important. They reflect the parties' enduring values and policy programmes but their content varies as parties adapt to new demands. They also reflect internal struggles between factions within parties and delicate compromises that cannot easily be re-opened. The importance of manifesto is illustrated by the way that the rules relating to the writing of the manifesto are precisely laid out in the Labour Party Rule Book and the Federal constitution of the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative constitution merely provides that policy-making shall be the responsibility of the party leader.¹ In the case of the Liberal Democrats, moreover, elaborate procedures were put in place (the so-called 'triple lock') to fetter the discretion of the party leader in the event of a hung parliament. The purpose of this document was, at least in part, to ensure that the leader did not set aside the manifesto.

The manifesto forms the basis of a party's appeal. It is variously propounded, picked over and poked at by opponents during the campaign. Although few but the policy wonks, journalists and political scientists read them, they map out the essential terrain of the election campaign, make proposals and provide the basis for a mandate to govern. They also provide benchmarks for judging whether governments have carried out what they said they were going to do and hence whether they deserve to be re-elected at a subsequent election.

The winning party in British general elections has typically claimed a 'mandate' to govern. The nature of this mandate is, however, ambiguous. It could mean that the government is authorised to implement the proposals set out in its manifesto but whether this refers to the manifesto in its entirety is not entirely clear. It could also mean – rather more strongly – that the government is 'required' or 'commanded' to implement its manifesto. The manifesto, in effect, represents an 'offer' that is 'accepted' by the electorate and constitutes a

¹ Clause 5 of the Labour constitution; Clause 7.3 of the Liberal Democrat Federal constitution; The Conservative constitution.

binding contract with the people. If the contract is breached there is no recourse to the courts, only the ballot box. Those parties that breach manifesto proposals can expect to be punished.

Voters are not able to pick and choose their favourite bits of each party's manifesto. Manifestos are written on a 'take-it-or-leave-it' basis. Victorious parties claim a 'mandate' for every proposal in their manifesto, even where there is considerable evidence that the public in fact oppose it. In 2010 no single party could claim they had 'won' the election: certainly not in the sense of winning a majority of the vote or an overall majority in the House of Commons (Table 1). In principle there were numerous possible administrations. The mathematics were so finely balanced that no fewer than 32 minimal winning coalitions (MWCs) were possible.² With the removal of Sinn Fein's seats – the party abstains from the Westminster parliament – there remained 16 MWCs (see Appendices A and B). In practice, however, there were only three administrations that anybody thought stood much of a chance of forming: a minority Conservative government, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition with support from nationalist parties.

Table 1: UK General Election 2010

Party	Votes %	Seats N	Seats %
Conservatives (CON)	36.1	307	47.2
Labour (LAB)	29.0	258	39.7
Liberal Democrats (LD)	23.0	57	8.8
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)	0.6	8	1.2
Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP)	1.7	6	0.9
Sinn Fein (SF)	0.6	5	0.8
Plaid Cymru (PC)	0.6	3	0.5
Social Democratic & Labour Party	0.4	3	0.5
Green (GRN)	1.0	1	0.2
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI)	0.1	1	0.2
Independent Unionist (IND)	0.1	1	0.2
Others	6.8	0	0
TOTAL	100.0	650	100.0

The Parties

The two parties that ultimately formed the coalition government were not the most obvious partners in government. Developments in the election campaign and in the period since the last election created the context in which they made their choice.

² A minimal winning coalition is a majority coalition that loses its majority if any party defects (Riker, 1962).

The Liberal Democrats

The 2010 election was, in turn, exhilarating, crushing but ultimately historic for the Liberal Democrats. Going into the campaign in third place in the opinion polls on 20%, the party saw a surge in support of 10 points after Nick Clegg's stunning performance in the first leaders' debate (Allen et al., forthcoming). There were high hopes of a dramatic breakthrough for the party. However, the poll surge prompted more scrutiny of the Liberal Democrats' left-leaning policies on immigration and defence. Support fell back sharply on polling day: even though the Liberal Democrats saw a rise in their vote share to 23%, it was an anti-climax after the early optimism that followed the debates. Moreover, a strong Tory performance in the South of England saw the Liberal Democrats suffer a net loss of five parliamentary seats to 57.

After the initial shock of the result, however, the party's leadership realised that they were in a potentially powerful position in the hung parliament. Supporting the Conservatives would give the latter a parliamentary majority after 13 years in the wilderness. The same was not true if the party supported Labour, but it might be possible to win the backing of nationalist and minor parties in a 'progressive alliance'. Most Liberal Democrat MPs and members would be more comfortable with a deal with Labour because of the parties' close ideological proximity on the centre-left. On the other hand, Clegg had repositioned his party. Economic liberals associated with *The Orange Book* (Marshall and Laws, 2004) of essays on reviving classical liberalism were promoted to most of the key portfolios. The party argued for lower taxes rather than higher public spending. Clegg also readopted the strategy of 'equidistance' between Labour and the Conservatives (Quinn and Clements, forthcoming).

In November 2009, Clegg signalled his willingness to consider working with the Tories by stating that, in the event of a hung parliament, 'the party which has got the strongest mandate from the British people will have the first right to seek to govern'. He did not specify whether 'mandate' referred to the party winning the most votes or most seats: at the time, it was thought possible that the Tories could win the most votes but Labour the most seats. His comments were interpreted to mean that the Liberal Democrats might support a minority Conservative government (Coates, 2009). Although the Tories had the 'first right' to seek to govern in these circumstances, that did not mean they had an exclusive right and the option of a deal with Labour would be left open if negotiations with the Tories failed.

The Conservatives

The Conservatives spent the five years before the 2010 general election 'modernising' their policies, their organisation and most important, their party image (Bale, 2010; Quinn, 2008).

Under David Cameron, elected to the leadership in 2005, the party sought to soften its image by seeking to increase female and ethnic-minority representation in the party, emphasising issues such as environmentalism, and adopting a more socially-liberal approach. Traditional right-wing emphases on tax cuts, immigration and the European Union were played down, although there was no wholesale abandonment of previous positions. Cameron's approach did not always win enthusiastic support from the Tory right, but the latter tolerated it as long as the party retained the steady lead it had secured in the opinion polls. With the onset of recession, however, the Conservatives appeared to move back towards their small-state positions of the past, initially criticising government intervention during the financial crisis. Later, the party emphasised the need to deal quickly with the budget deficit that had grown during the recession. It was the key dividing line between the Tories, on the one hand, and Labour and the Liberal Democrats on the other, during the election campaign.

The election result was a disappointment to the Conservatives. They had high hopes of winning an outright majority, but Britain's electoral system made that task very difficult. Despite achieving their biggest swing from Labour since 1979, the Tories were left 19 seats short of an overall majority, although they were the largest party.

The Conservatives' focus on winning a majority had led them to talk up the economic dangers of a hung parliament. Cameron claimed that Britain's AAA credit rating would be at threat in the absence of a stable majority government. Kenneth Clarke suggested that a sterling crisis could ensue in the event of a hung parliament and the IMF might have to be called in to rescue the country (Prince, 2010). As it turned out, the last days of the election took place against the backdrop of an economic crisis in Greece, as the government in Athens struggled to persuade the financial markets that it could repay its debts. These events would later influence the coalition negotiations that took place in Britain.

From Hung Parliament to Coalition Government

The election resulted in a complex distribution of seats that left the Conservatives as the largest party, but needing the support of other parties to command a legislative majority. Labour would need the support of the Liberal Democrats and some minor parties if it were to command a majority. The hung parliament led to one executive outcome among several and so there are three things that it is necessary to explain. First, what set of governments were feasible? Second, which outcomes did the parties prefer? Third, why was the eventual outcome a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition?

Before answering these questions, it is useful to distinguish between *executive coalitions* and *legislative coalitions* (Laver and Schofield, 1990: 67; Budge and Laver, 1992: 5). Executive coalitions consist of the parties that form the government. Legislative coalitions are the set of parties that sustain the government in parliamentary votes. Some parties, called ‘support parties’, may be part of the legislative coalition but not the executive coalition. Moreover, the members of the legislative coalition may change from vote to vote. Thus, it is possible for minority governments, whether they consist of one party or more, to be *viable* and to survive in office, provided that there are other parties in the legislature that will support them, or at least, will not vote against them.

Feasible Governmental Options

A number of options were theoretically possible, although some were quickly dismissed. A minority Labour government and a Labour-Conservative grand coalition were never seriously considered, largely for reasons of legitimacy and practicality. The budget deficit, however important, was not a national emergency equivalent to the Second World War or the Great Depression. Neither was a Conservative coalition with nationalist and unionist parties feasible. There were deep ideological differences between the Tories and the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish nationalists on the economy and on relations between London and the Celtic nations. The Northern Irish unionists did not have enough seats to offer the Conservatives a majority. That left three possible administrations: a minority Conservative government, a Lib-Lab or ‘rainbow’ coalition, and a Conservative-Lib-Dem coalition.

(i) Minority Conservative Government

For a while, a minority Conservative government had looked to be the most likely outcome given the ideological distances between the Conservatives and the other parties. It could operate in two different ways. The more confrontational approach would see the Conservatives push ahead with governing alone and defy the other parties to vote down the Queen’s Speech. If the Tories performed well in office, they might be able to call another election within a few months, following the precedent of the previous hung parliament in February 1974. Alternatively, a more formal *legislative* coalition in which the Liberal Democrats would offer supply-and-confidence support to a minority Conservative

government seemed feasible.³ The Tories would monopolise the spoils of office while the Lib Dems could maintain their independence and keep some distance from the government.

A minority government could be unstable, however, at a time when the country's economic problems demanded a strong government to reassure the markets. Besides, there was no guarantee that the Tories would perform better in a second election in 2010. The government might have had to take some unpopular decisions on spending cuts and/or tax rises, decisions that could harm its electoral prospects. The governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, allegedly said before the election that, whichever party formed the next government could end up finding itself out of power for a generation because of the austerity measures it would need to take (Elliott, 2010). Yet without an early second election, the government could find itself left in power until such a time when its Labour and Liberal Democrat opponents decided to pull the plug on it.

(ii) Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive Coalition plus 'Rainbow' Legislative Coalition

A second option would be a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition with support from the nationalist parties. Despite talk in the media of a 'rainbow' coalition between Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Celtic nationalists, it appears that this possibility was not taken seriously. More consideration was given to a Lib-Lab minority government, which would have a combined total of 315 seats, with support from a broader *legislative* coalition that included the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the SDLP, the APNI and the single Green MP. Together, the parties would control 329 seats, an effective majority of 13 assuming Sinn Fein's abstention from parliament. The DUP were not essential to this legislative coalition, although their hostility to the Conservatives was noted.⁴

The basis of an *executive* coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats was a shared ideological position on the centre-left. Both had long been committed to social justice, a degree of redistribution and a major role for the state. They also agreed on a slower programme than favoured by the Conservatives to reduce the budget deficit.

A *legislative* coalition would also be based on ideological similarities. The SDLP took the Labour whip in the Commons, while the APNI was a sister party of the Liberal Democrats. The Greens were a party firmly on the left. The SNP and Plaid were also centre-left. Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, had called for a 'progressive alliance' in the aftermath of

³ In other words, the Liberal Democrats would promise to support the Conservatives in supply votes and on confidence motions, but would be free to vote against the government in other votes.

⁴ Interview, Lord Rennard of Wavertree, Westminster, 20 July 2010.

the election results. On the other hand, the SNP's secessionist policy was a major difference with the pro-union stance of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Nevertheless, senior figures in the Liberal Democrats believed that the SNP and Plaid would support a Lib-Lab coalition because there would be the possibility of proportional representation for Westminster elections, which would benefit both nationalist parties.⁵

(iii) Conservative-Liberal Democrat Executive Coalition

The third option was for a Conservative-Liberal Democrat executive coalition. This outcome appeared an obvious one given the electoral arithmetic, as the coalition would govern with a comfortable majority of 83, assuming Sinn Fein maintained its policy of abstention. The major perceived drawback, however, was that the two parties were ideologically far apart. The Conservatives were firmly rooted on the centre-right but the Liberal Democrats, despite having a policy of 'equidistance' between Labour and the Tories, were traditionally labelled as a centre-left party. There would thus be serious questions asked about the cohesion of a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government.

The Parties' Preferred Options

Conservatives. Many on the Tory right preferred a minority Conservative government, suspecting that the Liberal Democrats would dilute Tory policies (Winnett, 2010). The *Daily Telegraph* reported one Conservative frontbencher as saying: 'No deal with the Lib Dems. No proportional representation. No cabinet posts. We should dare them to prop up Labour via a confidence vote. They haven't the guts.' (Porter and Winnett, 2010) Many Tories and their supporters in the press believed, as *The Times* put it, that Cameron had earned 'the moral right to govern the country' (*Times Leader*, 2010).

A coalition, however, had a strong appeal for Cameron. A well-sourced newspaper account of the election aftermath claimed that Cameron was unconvinced that the Tories would win an early second election. He was also reportedly worried about a backlash from his own mutinous backbenchers over the conduct of the election campaign and his failure to win outright. A deal with the Liberal Democrats would safeguard his own position (Oakeshott, et al., 2010). It would also prevent him from being a prisoner of his own right-wing backbenchers and enable him to implement moderate, centre-ground policies.

⁵ Rennard interview.

Labour. The question for Labour was whether it wanted to remain in government at all. It had just polled its second-worst share of the vote since the 1930s and its leader looked to have been decisively rejected by the electorate. Nevertheless, Brown and key Labour figures such as the cabinet ministers, Lord Mandelson, Lord Adonis and Alan Johnson all supported moves to form a Lib-Lab minority government. There was, however, a realisation that Brown could not remain prime minister indefinitely (Mandelson, 2010: 543).

Other Labour figures were opposed to a coalition. It was alleged that Ed Balls, a member of Labour's negotiating team, was particularly hostile (Oakeshott, et al., 2010). A number of senior Labour figures, including two former home secretaries in David Blunkett and John Reid, came out publicly against, largely on the grounds that the public would not accept it. They were also worried about the price the nationalists would extract for their support. Protecting Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not England, from budget cuts would stoke English resentment towards what would inevitably be dubbed a 'Celtic coalition'. On the other hand, if the nationalists were not appeased, there was the risk that they could bring down the government, as they had helped to do in 1979.

Liberal Democrats. Ideologically and temperamentally, the Liberal Democrats are a centre-left party. Reports indicated that their MPs (and individual members) ideally would have preferred a deal with Labour (Oakeshott, et al., 2010). However, a Lib-Lab coalition was problematical for a number of reasons. First, it would lack a majority, although senior Lib Dems were confident that the nationalists would support it. Second, it would suffer from a lack of political legitimacy. The Tories and parts of the media dubbed it 'a coalition of losers' (H. Watt, 2010), given that it would involve the parties that came second and third in the election. Later, in the Labour-Liberal Democrat negotiations, Clegg insisted that any Lib-Lab deal would depend on Gordon Brown standing down as prime minister. The Lib Dems did not want to prop up a prime minister who had just been rejected by the electorate (Mandelson, 2010: 547-8). Third, the Liberal Democrats were concerned that Labour was not united behind a deal. As one Lib Dem reportedly said, 'If we were going to do a deal with Labour we would need every single Labour MP on board, because the numbers were so tight. How on earth would it work if senior influential figures were clearly against it and could not be relied upon to vote with any administration we formed?' (Oakeshott, et al., 2010).

A deal with the Conservatives was also problematical, however. The two parties were not ideologically close, particularly at the grassroots level. Tory activists were right-wing and Eurosceptic whereas Lib-Dem activists had a left-wing reputation far removed from the

centrism of *Orange Book* MPs. The Liberal Democrats' internal 'triple lock' mechanism required three-fourths majorities of MPs and the Federal Executive to support a deal and if they did not, an activist conference or even an all-member ballot could be called.⁶ Moreover, the Liberal Democrats were sceptical about the chances of extracting concessions from the Tories on the key issue of electoral reform. The Lib Dems wanted proportional representation but might be prepared to accept a move towards the alternative vote (AV) system. Labour had promised a referendum on AV in its manifesto. The Conservatives were virtually united in their opposition to any change to the 'first-past-the-post' system. Therefore, if the Liberal Democrats were to back a Conservative government, it initially looked more likely to be on a supply-and-confidence basis rather than in an executive coalition.

The Formation of the Coalition Government

Clegg announced on the morning after the election that the Conservatives, as the party with the most votes and seats, should have the first opportunity to seek to form a government. That afternoon, Cameron read a televised statement that surprised everyone. He made a 'big, open and comprehensive offer to the Liberal Democrats', promising to help them to 'implement key planks of their election manifesto, providing the country with economic as well as political stability, and finding further ways in which Liberal Democrats can be involved in making this happen.'⁷ He did not say whether that would involve a formal coalition. Cameron indicated that he would deliver on the four priorities in the Liberal Democrat manifesto: fairer taxes, a pupil premium to direct money towards schools in poorer areas, a move towards a low-carbon economy and a committee of inquiry on political reform. However, he refused to compromise on reducing the budget deficit, maintaining a strong national defence, not being 'soft' on immigration and not granting more powers to the EU (N. Watt, 2010). These red lines were designed to prevent opposition to a deal from the Tory right.

Cameron's statement set the agenda for the following five days in which the Liberal Democrats negotiated first with the Conservatives and then with Labour. The Liberal Democrats were genuinely surprised at the scale of the concessions that the Tories were prepared to make on policy (Oakeshott, et al., 2010). In respect of their own four manifesto priorities, one of the Liberal Democrat negotiators, David Laws, estimated that his party secured 75-80% of what it wanted.⁷ The Liberal Democrats made less headway on immigration, Europe and the speed of deficit reduction, although none of these policies was

⁶ For the full text, see <http://blogs.ft.com/westminster/files/2010/03/the-lib-dem-triple-lock.pdf>.

⁷ Interview, Rt Hon. David Laws MP, Westminster, 15 June 2010.

among its priorities. Clegg later said that he changed his mind during the election campaign on the need for swift action to reduce the deficit because of the Greek sovereign debt crisis. It also became clear that a Conservative-Lib-Dem deal would entail a full coalition, largely because of the need to demonstrate stability to the markets (BBC, 2010).

The major obstacle to a deal with the Tories, however, remained electoral reform. The Conservatives offered to set up a committee of inquiry but the Liberal Democrats rejected that, having found out with the Jenkins Commission in 1998 that such inquiries need not result in change. This sticking point created an opportunity for Labour to get back in the game. The main impediment to a Lib-Lab deal was Brown. Secret discussions between Clegg and Brown focused on when Brown would step down, discussions that were complicated by the personal animosity between the two men. According to some reports, Brown initially promised to go by the autumn but later appeared to change his mind. Not until four days after the election did he bow to the inevitable and declare that he would go immediately. When he did, he also announced the start of formal negotiations between Labour and the Lib Dems.

Liberal Democrats disagreed over whether Clegg's agreement to open talks with Labour was forced on him by his own party, not least the former leaders Ashdown, Kennedy and Campbell, or a calculated strategy to extract concessions from the Tories (Kirkup, 2010). The effect, however, was to force the Conservatives to shift on electoral reform. The party's chief negotiator, William Hague, declared that the Conservatives would go the 'extra mile' and offer a referendum on the alternative vote (AV) electoral system as part of a 'final offer' to the Liberal Democrats (Webster, et al., 2010). A senior Lib-Dem negotiator said that, without this offer on AV, he would not have felt able to recommend the deal.⁸ One remaining issue was to stop the Tories from opportunistically calling an early election. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats insisted that fixed-term parliaments would have to be a part of any deal, a demand to which the Conservatives acceded, although that term would be five years at the Tories' insistence. The negotiations resulted in a draft agreement published on 12 May 2010 and was followed by a full agreement entitled, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* and subtitled *Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility* (HM Government, 2010).

The Party Manifestos

Comparing the coalition agreement in terms of policy with what the parties had produced individually in the form of their election manifestos for 2010 should help us understand how

⁸ Rennard interview.

the government arrived at its action programme for up to five years. It might also enable us to provide some evidence for claims about which of the parties ‘won’ in the process of getting the agenda set according to its priorities, rather than those of its erstwhile rival.

The precise documents used in this analysis are the Conservative and Liberal Democrat general election manifestos for 2010. The Conservative document, launched on 13 April and entitled *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain: The Conservative Manifesto 2010*, consisted of over 120 pages, although many were taken up by pictures, graphs and other devices which sought to attract readers’ attention (Conservative Party, 2010). The Lib-Dem manifesto, entitled *Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010: Change that Works for You*, was launched the following day (Liberal Democrats, 2010). Consisting of some 110 pages, it had fewer pictures but different textual formats, notably text boxes and bullet-pointed statements.

The manifestos included a personal statement by the party leader. Both were considerably longer and more formal than their counterparts in 2005. Both had been the subject of considerable discussion, research and argument within the respective parties for a considerable period of time – arguably since their respective leaders had been elected. In 2010, both parties (and indeed Labour too) were led by men who had not been leader at the last general election in 2005. Each ensured that his personal imprint was stamped on the manifesto, which was done partly by their central involvement in the manifesto-building process and partly through their personal statements introducing the documents.

Content Analysing the Coalition Agreement and the Manifestos

The coalition document was content analysed according to the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) coding scheme and the data compared with the content of the manifestos of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in terms of several indicators (Budge et al., 2001).⁹ This scheme was developed in the late 1970s by a group of political scientists which became known as the Manifesto Research Group (MRG). In essence the group expanded pioneering work undertaken by Robertson (1976), who sought to test Downsian claims that parties move to extremes of the ideological spectrum if they are confident of winning an election. Otherwise, they will gravitate to the centre and try to capture the median voter.

Robertson’s evidence was based on a content analysis of British party manifestos for elections held between 1922 and 1974 and was based on a coding scheme of 21 categories that emphasised differences in policy *priority* rather than adoption of *confrontational*

⁹ Coding of the coalition agreement was undertaken independently by two coders. A level of 81% correspondence was achieved and disputed categories were reconciled.

positions on the same issues. Hence salience became the key measure. The MRG, which transformed into the CMP in 1989, extended both the number of countries analysed (to 19 in the first instance) and the number of categories to 56. Of these, 26 are included in a summative measure to map the content of party-manifestos in left-right terms. In the 1990s, studies were undertaken to link party manifestos with coalition government programmes (Laver and Budge, 1992). Later studies used the CMP coding scheme or related schemes derived from it to link manifesto intention to government output, either through pledge analysis (Bara, 2005) or government expenditure analysis (Klingemann *et al*, 1994). There is thus a clear protocol for linking such documents in this manner.

Top Ten Policies

Following the practice of saliency theory, we identified the ‘top ten’ policy areas covered in the documents according to the percentage of content they accounted for. These are summarised in Table 2 and reflect some interesting features. As we might expect, the policy areas emphasised by both the agreement and the party manifestos are quite similar. Eight of the ten are common to all three documents. It is also possible to look at the Liberal Democrats’ four manifesto priorities – political reform, fair taxation, lower carbon emissions and a pupil premium – in relation to whether or not they are among the priorities of the coalition agreement, and indeed the manifestos of both parties.

Table 2: Top Ten Policy References in the Coalition Agreement and Party Manifestos (2010)

CMP variable number	Policy dimension	Coalition agreement		Conservative manifesto		Lib Dem manifesto	
		Rank	Value %	Rank	Value %	Rank	Value %
per303	Government efficiency	1	10.3	2	8.7	1	10.2
per504	Health & welfare	2	6.9	=5	5.2	10	3.7
per706	Demographic groups	=3	5.4	4	5.4	5	6.3
per403	Market regulation	=3	5.4	-	-	-	-
per501	Environment	=5	5.2	=5	5.2	3	7.4
per411	Technology & infrastructure	=5	5.2	8	5.0	2	7.5
per605	Law & order	7	5.1	3	5.7	9	3.8
per301	Decentralisation +ve	=8	4.1	=5	5.2	6	5.5
per107	Internationalism +ve	=8	4.1	9	4.7	8	5.0
per402	Incentives	10	3.8	-	-	-	-
per414	Economic orthodoxy	-	-	10	3.9	7	5.3
per506	Education	-	-	-	-	4	6.4
per305	Political authority	-	-	1	12.2	-	-

Political reform is encompassed by ‘government efficiency’ (per303). It ranks first in the coalition agreement and the Liberal Democrat manifesto and second in the Conservative manifesto. It is hardly surprising that it should then be prominent in the agreement.

The second priority, lower carbon emissions is included in ‘environment’ (per501). This dimension is also prominent in the agreement, ranking equal fifth. It is ranked third in the Liberal Democrat manifesto and fifth in the Conservative manifesto.

The third priority is the ‘pupil premium’, which is a very specific item. It is a combination of two main elements, education and social justice, and is clearly reflected in the Liberal Democrats’ high ranking (fourth) for education. While it is mentioned clearly in the coalition agreement, its overall salience is insufficient to make the top ten policies.

The final priority is fair taxation. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific category for this policy as it relates to more than one and its precise meaning depends on the context in which it is found within the relevant document. For example, it could be coded as incentives, social justice or economic planning depending on the specific wording of the relevant sentence. That might lead to underestimation of the item.

There are two items in the agreement that do not figure prominently in top ten manifesto rankings for either party: market regulation and incentives. Market regulation is of little significance in the Conservative document, scoring only 1.8% though it ranks thirteenth for the Liberal Democrats with 3.1%. Incentives, which ranks tenth in the agreement, ranks eleventh for the Liberal Democrats scoring 2.9% and twelfth for the Conservatives with 3.3%. Interestingly, the category that encompasses deficit reduction, i.e. ‘economic orthodoxy’, is just of insufficient salience in the agreement to make the top ten, ranking eleventh with 2.9%. It ranks seventh for the Liberal Democrats and tenth for the Tories.

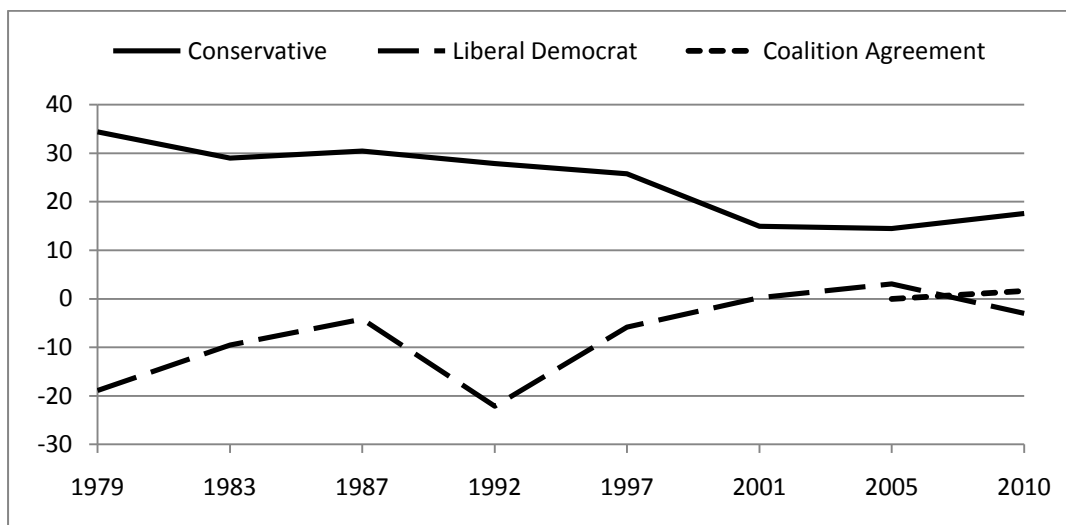
It is difficult to conclude from these comparative rankings that one party was favoured by the agreement more than the other. Given the broad nature of some of the CMP categories and the highly specific nature of some of the coalition policies, it is difficult to be more precise than that. What is clear, however, is that policy areas of importance to both, though not necessarily in equal measure, were reflected in the agreement.

Left, Right or Centre?

An important use of content analysis that is associated with the CMP is the tracking of party positions along a summative left-right scale, based on 26 CMP policy variables (see Bara, 2006). Figure 1 maps the positions for the coalition agreement and the two participating

parties according to the CMP measure.¹⁰ In 2010, the Conservatives' aggregate right-left ('rile') score was +17.6, while the Liberal Democrats' was -3.0. Thus, the two parties were on opposite sides of the left-right divide. The coalition agreement's 'rile' score was +1.6, which is just right-of-centre. However, it is much closer to the Liberal Democrats (a difference of 4.6) than to the Conservatives (a difference of 16.0). If the coalition agreement had been at the halfway point between the parties, it would have had a 'rile' score of +7.3.

Figure 1: Left-Right Positions of the Coalition Parties and the Coalition Agreement



Does this result provide a firm basis for suggesting that the Liberal Democrats won the battle in terms of getting their policies prioritised in the coalition agreement? Not entirely. The policies included in the left-right index comprise only 50% of the content of the coalition agreement. Their corresponding contribution to the content of the manifestos is 57% for the Conservatives and 46% for the Liberal Democrats. Nevertheless, it is an indication that at least part of the agreement favours the Liberal Democrats.

Policy Sections in the Coalition Agreement

A slightly different way of looking at policies in the agreement is to examine them section by section. One rationale for doing so is that a coalition agreement, unlike a party manifesto, is a compromise between two parties. One way in which coalition partners can compromise is by splitting the difference between their policies. A different method of compromise is to give one party most of what it wants in one policy area while letting the other party have most of what it wants on something else. By looking at the separate policy sections in the coalition

¹⁰ A dummy value of zero is given for an imaginary coalition agreement for 2005.

agreement, we can determine whether some are more consistently ‘left’ and inclined to the Liberal Democrats, while others are more consistently ‘right’ and favourable to the Conservatives. Some sections might split the difference and mix ‘left’ and ‘right’ statements.

Table 3: Left-Right Scores for Individual Sections in the Coalition Agreement

Section number	Section heading	% of all statements	Right %	Left %	Rile %
3	Civil liberties	2.9	100.0	0	100.0
29	Taxation	2.4	93.3	0	93.3
21	National security	1.6	90.0	10.0	80.0
6	Crime and policing	3.5	77.3	0	77.3
14	Families	2.7	64.7	0	64.7
17	Immigration	1.7	63.6	0	63.6
9	Deficit reduction	2.2	57.1	0	57.1
20	Justice	1.9	66.7	16.7	50.0
8	Defence	2.9	44.4	16.7	27.8
27	Social action	1.7	54.5	27.3	27.3
1	Banking	2.7	52.9	41.2	11.8
13	Europe	2.2	7.1	0	7.1
10	Energy and climate	5.4	14.7	8.8	5.9
16	Government transparency	2.7	5.9	0	5.9
11	Environment and food	3.5	4.5	0	4.5
24	Political reform	7.0	4.5	0	4.5
7	Culture	2.7	0	0	0
12	Equalities	1.4	0	0	0
30	Transport	2.5	6.3	6.3	0
4	Communities	4.9	9.7	25.8	-16.1
25	Public health	1.0	16.7	33.3	-16.7
28	Social care	1.3	0	25.0	-25.0
31	Universities	2.4	6.7	33.3	-26.7
15	Foreign affairs	1.9	25.0	58.3	-33.3
23	Pensioners and older people	1.6	0	40.0	-40.0
2	Business	4.3	18.5	59.3	-40.7
26	Schools	3.5	0	50.0	-50.0
22	NHS	6.8	7.0	62.8	-55.8
19	Jobs and welfare	2.5	0	62.5	-62.5
18	International development	3.7	4.3	78.3	-73.9
5	Consumer protection	1.7	0	81.8	-81.8
-	Foreword	10.0	25.4	19.0	6.3
-	Back cover	0.8	40.0	0	40.0
	Total (whole document)	100.0	25.6	24.0	1.6

Note: Rile % = Right % - Left %

Fully 31 policy headings were listed in the coalition agreement, each containing its own set of coded statements. Table 3 provides ‘rile’ scores for each section. They are calculated in the same way that the overall document is calculated, with left statements subtracted from right statements and the result expressed as a percentage of all statements in that particular section. Sections are listed in descending order of ‘rile’ scores, with those at the top of the table being more ‘right-wing’ and those towards the bottom being more ‘left-wing’. Civil liberties, taxation and national security have the highest rile scores while consumer protection, international development, and jobs and welfare have the lowest.

To assess the policy success of the two parties, it is helpful to group some of the sections together. On the *economic* issues of taxation and deficit reduction, policy is strongly to the right, with taxation having a ‘rile’ score of +93.3 and deficit reduction +57.1. These high scores do not necessarily mean that these policies are extremist, but rather, that those sections are *consistently* ‘right’ rather than ‘left’ in their statements. On this basis, it could be argued that the Conservatives ‘won’ on economic policy. However, the Liberal Democrat manifesto pledged to cut taxes for the low paid. The focus on tax-cutting undoubtedly reflected the influence of the party’s *Orange Book* economic liberals. By 2010, the Lib Dem leadership wanted a smaller state and so it would be premature to say they ‘lost’ on this issue. On the other hand, cutting the deficit was a Tory position and the fact that it took priority over any other measure in the agreement indicates that the Conservatives won that argument. However, although the Liberal Democrats wanted to move slower on reducing the deficit, it was not one of their manifesto priorities.

The Conservatives secured a big ‘win’ on *security* issues, or what have sometimes been called ‘drawbridge’ issues. The agreement saw strong ‘right’ ‘rile’ scores for national security, crime & policing, immigration, justice and defence. Europe was weakly ‘right’. These are policy areas on which centre-right parties are traditionally strong. The two issues on which the Liberal Democrats came under fiercest attack in the election campaign – immigration and Trident – were both security issues.

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats appear to have ‘won’ conclusively on the issue of public services. There were strong ‘left’ rile scores for jobs and welfare, the NHS, schools, pensioners & older people, universities and social care. The Liberal Democrats’ reputation as a left-leaning party was partly based on its commitment to public services, and that commitment is clear in the coalition agreement. However, on university tuition fees, a key issue for Liberal Democrat members, the coalition agreement merely permits Lib-Dem MPs to abstain in any parliamentary vote to increase tuition fees.

A word of caution is needed on public services. These are all areas of public spending and the agreement is clear that these are secondary to the goal of deficit reduction. As stated on the back cover: 'The deficit reduction programme takes precedence over any of the other measures in this agreement'. Thus, Lib-Dem gains on public services were potentially weak.

On Britain's *external relations*, the Liberal Democrats secured a 'left' slant to the coalition agreement. That is evident on foreign affairs, where talk of multilateral commitments is explicit, and in particular on international development. This section is the sixth-biggest policy segment in the entire agreement and had a rile score of -73.9.

Areas of policy requiring *regulation* also saw a strong 'left' flavour. These included banking (+11.8 but a big 'left' element), business (-40.7) and consumer protection (-81.8). Partly, this development owed something to the financial and consumer debt crises.

The highest 'right' rile score is for *civil liberties*, understood here as the balance of power between the individual and the state. Thus, individualism is 'right' and collectivism is 'left'. The Conservatives became more consistently supportive of the civil-liberties agenda under Cameron than they had been under their previous three leaders. However, although seen as a left-leaning party, the Liberal Democrats are *liberal*: they are an individualist party rather than a collectivist one in the mould of Labour.

Two final groups of policy areas that were important in the agreement did not translate easily into left-right terms. First, *political reform* was the longest policy section in the entire agreement. It contained details on, among other things, the referendum on AV. Its rile score was weakly 'right'. It is hard to say that one party 'won' on this issue, since it is an instance of compromise and agreement to disagree, e.g. the AV referendum.

Second, *environmental* policy, encompassing sections on energy & climate and environment & food, together accounted for 9 percent of the coalition agreement. Both had low 'right' scores. Both parties had emphasised green issues in recent years, the Tories doing so mainly since Cameron became leader. An important remaining disagreement between the parties is in this area, on nuclear power. Lib-Dem MPs can abstain in a parliamentary vote on building nuclear power stations but it will not be a confidence issue.

It is clear that the Conservatives did well on some issues while the Liberal Democrats did better on others. However, both parties could be satisfied. Before the coalition negotiations, Cameron set out four 'red lines' for the Conservatives: the necessity of immediate action to reduce the deficit, not being 'soft' on immigration, strong defence, and Euroscepticism. On the basis of the sectional 'rile' scores, the Conservatives secured all of their 'red lines'. The Liberal Democrats' four priorities in their manifesto were fairer taxes, a

pupil premium, a green economy and political reform. They made big gains in all of these areas, although the latter two areas did not translate easily into left-right terms. It appears, therefore, that the principal form of compromise in the coalition agreement consisted of each party achieving ‘victories’ in policy areas of high importance to it. On the whole, they did not simply split the difference on policies.

In areas where there were genuine differences, the parties sometimes devised pragmatic solutions, such as agreements to disagree. In other instances, they set up reviews, which postponed debate (and disagreement) until a future date. For example, reviews were announced for control orders for terror suspects, ‘non-dom’ taxation and the stamp-duty threshold. On tuition fees, the parties agreed to wait for the Browne review, set up by the previous government, to report in the autumn of 2010.

Conclusion

The question of who won the coalition negotiations does not have a simple answer. However, the analysis in this paper offers some clues. On the basis of overall left-right placement, the agreement was closer to the Liberal Democrat manifesto than to the Conservative one, albeit to the right of centre. When individual policy areas were examined, the picture was more complicated and both parties could legitimately claim victories. But on the key issue of the deficit, the Conservatives won the argument.

Given the large discrepancy in the number of parliamentary seats won by the two parties, the Liberal Democrats’ achievements in the negotiations were impressive. That partly owed to the bargaining context. There were two feasible working-majority legislative coalitions – Conservative-Liberal Democrat and Labour-Liberal Democrat plus the nationalists – and the Liberal Democrats were the only party present in both of them. They were, in this sense, pivotal. Pivotality is a crucial means by which parties can extract concessions in bargaining contexts. The Liberal Democrats used the prospect of a deal with Labour as a means to extract concessions from the Conservatives. The clearest way in which that was true was over the Conservatives’ concession of a referendum on the AV electoral system. This concession was made only after it was announced that formal coalition discussions were commencing between Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The Liberal Democrats did not, however, have a completely free hand in dictating the terms of the coalition agreement with the Conservatives. The latter had the option of trying to form a minority government by themselves. There were major drawbacks with this option and it would likely have been unstable. However, the fact that it was feasible provided the

Conservatives with a fall-back position if the Liberal Democrats refused to compromise on the Tories 'red lines' on the deficit, immigration, defence and Europe. Any attempt to dilute Conservative policies in these areas would almost certainly have caused a rebellion among the Tory right. Since none of these policies were among the Liberal Democrats' four key policy priorities in their manifesto, they were able to compromise.

The method used in this paper to analyse the coalition agreement could be applied to other coalitions, e.g. the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalitions that ran the Scottish executive from 1999 to 2007. It provides a standardised way of examining policy documents. Usually, the method is applied to individual parties' manifestos, but coalition agreements are different types of documents. Unlike manifestos, they are not contracts between parties and voters as much as contracts between different governing parties. The CMP method has shed light on the coalition agreement. It highlighted policy areas where one or other party came out on top, and these largely reflected journalistic and political assessments. Further, the overall 'rile' score of the agreement was positioned between the 'rile' scores of the Conservative and Lib-Dem manifestos, which is precisely what would have been expected.

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Data

CMP/MARPOR (WZB), Data on British Manifestos 2010, available autumn 2010 from <http://www.wzb.eu>

Appendix A: All Minimal Winning Coalitions (MWCs)

	Minimal Winning Coalition (min. 326/650 seats)	Seats
1	CON + LAB (Grand coalition)	565
2	CON + LD	364
3	CON + DUP + SNP + SF	326
4	CON + DUP + SNP + PC + SDLP	327
5	CON + DUP + SNP + PC + GRN + APNI	326
6	CON + DUP + SNP + PC + GRN + IND	326
7	CON + DUP + SNP + PC + APNI + IND	326
8	CON + DUP + SNP + SDLP + GRN + APNI	326
9	CON + DUP + SNP + SDLP + GRN + IND	326
10	CON + DUP + SNP + SDLP + APNI + IND	326
11	CON + DUP + SF + PC + SDLP	326
12	CON + DUP + SF + PC + GRN + APNI + IND	326
13	CON + DUP + SF + SDLP + GRN + APNI + IND	326
14	CON + SNP + SF + PC + SDLP + GRN + APNI	326
15	CON + SNP + SF + PC + SDLP + GRN + IND	326
16	CON + SNP + SF + PC + SDLP + APNI + IND	326
17	LAB + LD + DUP + SNP	329
18	LAB + LD + DUP + SF	328
19	LAB + LD + DUP + PC	326
20	LAB + LD + DUP + SDLP	326
21	LAB + LD + DUP + GRN + APNI + IND	326
22	LAB + LD + SNP + SF	326
23	LAB + LD + SNP + PC + SDLP	327
24	LAB + LD + SNP + PC + GRN + APNI	326
25	LAB + LD + SNP + PC + GRN + IND	326
26	LAB + LD + SNP + PC + APNI + IND	326
27	LAB + LD + SNP + SDLP + GRN + APNI	326
28	LAB + LD + SNP + SDLP + GRN + IND	326
29	LAB + LD + SNP + SDLP + APNI + IND	326
30	LAB + LD + SF + PC + SDLP	326
31	LAB + LD + SF + PC + GRN + APNI + IND	326
32	LAB + LD + SF + SDLP + GRN + APNI + IND	326

Total MWCs in which each party is present

CON	16	LAB	17	LD	17	DUP	16	SNP	17	SF	12
PC	16	SDLP	16	GRN	15	APNI	15	IND	15		

Note: A minimal winning coalition (MWC) is a winning coalition that would lose its majority if any one of its member parties defected (see Riker, 1962; Laver and Schofield, 1990). The proportion of all possible MWCs in which a given party is present gives an indication of its bargaining power.

Appendix B: Minimal Winning Coalitions (MWCs) excluding Sinn Fein seats

	Minimal Winning Coalition (min. 323/645 seats)	Seats
1	CON + LAB (Grand coalition)	565
2	CON + LD	364
3	CON + DUP + SNP + PC	324
4	CON + DUP + SNP + SDLP	324
5	CON + DUP + SNP + GRN + APNI	323
6	CON + DUP + SNP + GRN + IND	323
7	CON + DUP + SNP + APNI + IND	323
8	LAB + LD + DUP	323
9	LAB + LD + SNP + PC	324
10	LAB + LD + SNP + SDLP	324
11	LAB + LD + SNP + GRN + APNI	323
12	LAB + LD + SNP + GRN + IND	323
13	LAB + LD + SNP + APNI + IND	323
14	LAB + LD + PC + SDLP + GRN + APNI	323
15	LAB + LD + PC + SDLP + GRN + IND	323
16	LAB + LD + PC + SDLP + APNI + IND	323

Total MWCs in which each party is present

CON	7	LAB	10	LD	10	DUP	6	SNP	10	SF	n/a
PC	5	SDLP	5	GRN	6	APNI	6	IND	6		