

**'Winning Here?' – A Critical Evaluation of Rennardism,
1992-2005**

Jonathan Marshall

BA (Hons) Politics and International Relations

**School of Politics and International Relations
University of Nottingham**

Supervisor: Dr. Mark Stuart

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Abstract

Chris Rennard was the Liberal Democrats' campaigning wizard, credited with bringing the party up to its high-water mark. This dissertation aims to explore Rennard's third party seat targeting strategy under Paddy Ashdown (1988-1999) and Charles Kennedy's leadership (1999-2005). Through a process of triangulation of Rennard's memoirs, Ashdown's diaries and Greg Hurst's biography on Kennedy and elite-level interviews with Chris Rennard and leading Liberal Democrat activist, Mark Pack, it will seek to qualitatively evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism. The findings demonstrate that Rennard's grassroots, community-based, incremental strategy was an effective way of increasing the Liberal Democrats' parliamentary representation.

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Introduction

The Liberal Democrats' first national breakthrough came in the 1997 General Election, where the party doubled their representation from 1992, resulting in forty-six MPs being elected, the largest electoral success by a third party since 1929 (Russell *et al.* 2002: 52). Chris Rennard's (Liberal Democrat Director of Campaigns and Elections 1989-2003; Chief Executive 2003-2009) knowledge of seat targeting and electoral strategy allowed him to 'drive the party machinery to make it more successful' (Rennard 2018: 75), contributing to the party's relative electoral success.

Born and raised in Liverpool, Rennard (1960-) was initiated into local Liberal campaigning at an early age, inspired by the hands-on approach of local Liberal councillor, Cyril Carr.

Rennard's involvement as key organiser at the successful Liverpool Edge Hill by-election in 1979 enabled him to gain invaluable insights into community-based campaigns, whilst benefiting from the experience of Carr, David Alton (Liberal Councillor) and Trevor Jones (Liberal Party President). Furthermore, Rennard used the 1980 Liverpool council elections to begin formulating a 'basic model' that he later adapted for the Liberal Democrats' very successful parliamentary target seat campaigns. On the basis of Rennard's proven success in Liverpool, John Spiller (Liberal Party Chief Executive) appointed Rennard as the East Midlands regional agent, allowing electoral prospects to be improved with his proposed 'campaign blueprint' (Rennard 2018: 11, 15-17, 26, 67). Rennard's campaigning strategy aided the party on a local level in numerous by-elections, as well as nationally, masterminding the party's increasing parliamentary gains in the 1992, 1997 and 2001 General Elections, culminating in sixty-two MPs being elected in 2005 (Brack 2011: 314-315).

The influence of Rennard's campaigning strategy led to the coining of the term 'Rennardism', which constituted a heavy focus on community-style politics and mobilising grassroots support. This involved the candidate taking a stand on local issues, canvassing, producing *Focus* newsletters and leaflets to highlight voters' grievances (Cutts 2006: 223). Ideally, this would be a long-term continuous period of intense campaigning at a local level, with the intention of firstly winning local council seats, then incrementally turning this success into parliamentary seats (Cutts 2006: 222). Increasing visibility of Liberal Democrat MPs and local councillors helped to extend the party's reach into neighbouring constituencies. Rennard successfully extrapolated this strategy, by taking a systematic approach, focusing party resources on potentially winnable seats (Brack 2011: 318).

The contemporary relevance of Rennardism as an electoral strategy has increased in salience now that the Liberal Democrats contemplate whether to follow an incremental, or a much more ambitious, expansionary strategy at the 2024 General Election. This therefore provides a clear justification for the research carried out in this dissertation.

As will become evident from the literature review, whilst there is significant research about Liberal Democrat seat targeting from a quantitative point of view, up until now there has been no qualitative study critiquing the efficacy of Rennardism. This dissertation intends to fill this gap in the literature. Through triangulation of Rennard's own memoirs, *Winning Here*, Paddy Ashdown's diaries, *The Ashdown Diaries* and Greg Hurst's biography, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw*, together with elite-level interviews with Lord Rennard and Mark Pack, this dissertation seeks to substantiate the main strengths and weaknesses of Rennardism.

This dissertation will be divided into two chapters. Chapter one will critically evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism during the Ashdown years (1988-1999), whilst Chapter two will focus on Kennedy's leadership (1999-2005). Both chapters will draw out any identifiable tensions under the criteria of their relationship and role, followed by strategy and ideology. It will then consider a number of measurable impacts, including Liberal Democrat resources at general elections, in particular, funding and membership, resource allocation and impact of by-elections and finally broader structural factors, including tactical voting and Liberal Democrat positioning as a protest party.

Literature Review

This literature review will firstly briefly outline international debates on the effectiveness of political campaigning, before considering the efficacy of campaigning in Britain. It then discusses difficulties centre parties face in overcoming the electoral constraints of first-past-the-post (FPTP), the credibility gap and ideological inconsistencies. Finally, it considers the impacts of incrementalism, incumbency and funding on the Liberal Democrats' electoral chances and subsequent strategy.

Within American political campaigning literature debate exists about whether campaigning matters. Some scholars argue that for presidential elections, 'fundamentals', including the economy, vote distribution and candidates' ideologies have a greater impact on voting behaviour (Gelman and King 1993; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2014). In contrast, other scholars concur that the campaign is necessary for the 'fundamentals' to reach their potential (Vavreck 2009; Erikson and Wlezien 2012). However, Jacobsen (2015: 41, 44) suggests that campaigns matter at every level, but their impact on voters is variable.

Campaigning impacts are most noticeable among floating, undecided voters (Mayer 2008) and less educated individuals, who are more susceptible to party messaging (Zaller 2004; Vavreck 2009). However, Hillygus and Shields (2008) argue that even well-informed partisans may deviate if they disagree with the party, or candidates' policies.

Pattie and Johnston's (2012) research on campaign effects in British elections concurs that local campaigning matters, having greater influence on middle ground, moderately partisan voters, who are influenced by campaign messaging. Despite voter targeting primarily being focused in key marginal seats, they state the importance of influencing individual voters.

In Britain, a form of local constituency campaigning has existed since the advent of contested elections, varying from 'treating' and bribery in the 1400 and 1500s (O'Leary 1962: 6-7), to local campaigning as recognised today. The national campaign, originating in the 1880s, increased in salience in the 1950s and 1960s (Denver and Hands 1997: 5, 15-16), leading to a clearly articulated consensus, primarily formulated in the *Nuffield Studies*, that the local constituency campaign paled in significance to its media-focused national counterpart (Rosenbaum 1997: 252). Hence, the local campaign in the *Nuffield Studies* was often referenced as a 'ritual' (Butler and King 1966: 191; Butler and Kavanagh 1988: 211), supporting the influential view that local constituency campaigning has virtually no impact on electoral outcome (Denver and Hands 1997: 33; Rosenbaum 1997: 252). This view is furthered by the *Nuffield Studies* authors ceasing to describe local campaigns from 1970, suggesting their lack of importance (Denver and Hands 1997: 32).

However, critics have questioned the reliability of this research, due to a lack of supporting data used to justify the decision to essentially discontinue qualitative discussions on local campaigning (Denver and Hands 1997: 36; Denver 2014: 72). Furthermore, Kavanagh, who would later be involved in the *Nuffield Study* (1974), carried out his nationwide survey-based study *Constituency Electioneering in Britain* (1970). Although adopting a quantitative approach, surveying three hundred and fifty candidates in the 1966 General Election, it failed to effectively evaluate the benefits of local campaigning. Hence, Kavanagh's stance on local campaigning later translated into subsequent *Nuffield Studies*.

Despite this entrenched view, Bochel and Denver's (1971) Dundee research showed that targeting and canvassing voters increased turnout by ten per cent and increased support for the Labour Party by four per cent, indicating the significance of local campaigning. Research

in the 1990s concurred by suggesting that intensive local constituency campaigning, relative to its opponents, has electoral benefits (Whiteley and Seyd 1994; Pattie *et al.* 1995; Denver and Hands 1997; Denver *et al.* 2003; Johnston and Pattie 2006; Fieldhouse and Cutts 2008; Fisher *et al.* 2011). However, within the limited literature conflicting views exist over the best way to measure campaign strength and intensity, enabling a comparison of campaign effectiveness across local constituencies. Pattie *et al.* (1995) and Johnston and Pattie (2006) use campaign spending data, due to its wide availability and relatively small margin for error, whereas Whiteley and Seyd (1994) advocate using constituency membership figures, as well as a political activism index. In contrast, Denver and Hands (1997) focus on postal survey data, asking local constituencies about campaign strengths. One flaw of this method is that there may be a lack of response from party agents, or inaccurate responses, leading to measurement errors. Notably, Denver and Hands (1997: 53) suggest that there may have been an uneven response rate, in particular from Scottish National Party (SNP) agents.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Denver and Hands' (1997) seminal quantitative survey-based research was the first attempt to measure the strength and intensity of local campaigning for the three main parties across Britain. It found that the efficacy of seat targeting is particularly evident in constituencies where intensive local campaigning has occurred. This was particularly beneficial to the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party, who were better able to target their resources in marginal seats, gaining an electoral advantage over the Conservative Party (Denver and Hands 1997: 264, 302). The study concludes that the strength of an above average campaign would have benefited the Liberal Democrats in the 1992 General Election by a ten per cent increase in the vote share, compared to seven per cent for the Labour Party (Denver and Hands 1997: 302-303).

Fisher *et al.* (2011: 821) and Denver (2014: 73) concur that constituency level campaigning was the most effective for the Liberal Democrats in the 2010 General Election, with the party benefiting from an increase of 3.7 per cent in the vote share, compared to Labour's 1.7 and the Conservatives' 0.8 per cent. These increases are particularly significant for the Liberal Democrats' electoral success, especially in tight contests. Whilst findings from these quantitative studies are consistent, there is a lack of qualitative research on Liberal Democrat campaigning and seat targeting. MacIver's (1996) *The Liberal Democrats*, the first comprehensive party analysis, could have provided some qualitative insight, but disappointingly the section on campaigning is brief.

Many scholars argue that the greatest challenge the Liberal Democrats face is the difficulty of overcoming the structural disadvantages of FPTP, making it hard for them to translate their thinly spread support into seats (Fieldhouse and Russell 2001: 735; Russell *et al.* 2002: 51; Brack 2011: 318; Johnson 2014: 201). Duverger (1964) argues that a simple plurality system tends to favour the two main parties, as voters are dissuaded from supporting the Liberal Democrats, perceiving that their vote may be wasted, either nationally or locally. This is known as the mechanical aspect of the 'credibility gap' (Fieldhouse and Russell 2001: 735; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 141, 201). Scholars concur that the Liberal Democrats also need to overcome the psychological constraints of the 'credibility gap', arising from a strong tendency among voters under a FPTP system when faced with the uncertainty of an unfamiliar choice of third party to switch back to one of the two main parties with which they are more familiar (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 201; Cutts 2006: 222; Cutts 2012: 96).

The difficulties stemming from majoritarian electoral systems are exacerbated by the Liberal Democrats' lack of a substantial heartland of support, lack of a core vote and weak

anatomy, with natural 'liberals' only making up a small proportion of voters. A consensus view exists that the Liberal Democrats have no strong socio-economic, or demographic identifiers (Fieldhouse and Russell 2001: 712; Russell *et al.* 2002: 51), making it harder to retain voters in comparison to the Conservative and Labour Parties (Crewe 1985: 116). Moreover, Crewe (1985: 121) and Russell *et al.* (2002: 59-60) argue that the Liberal Democrats also suffer from weaker party identification, resulting in voters being less likely to support their 'natural' party than voters identifying with the other two main parties. Hence, the Liberal Democrats have an unpredictable and ever-changing voter base (Fieldhouse and Russell 2001: 719; Russell *et al.* 2002: 51). Curtice (1996: 200) challenged this view, arguing that Liberal Democrat support in the 1990s primarily came from the educated middle class and instead of being thinly spread was concentrated in the south-west of England.

At a broader national level, the Liberal Democrats further struggle electorally due to ideological inconsistencies (Russell *et al.* 2002: 63; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 106; Cutts 2012: 96). A divergence of opinion exists among academics with Russell and Fieldhouse (2000: 88) suggesting that the abandonment of equidistance, a refusal of the party to convey preference for either Labour or Conservative parties (Leaman 1998: 160), by Ashdown in 1995, in an anti-Conservative direction may have lessened this effect, whilst Russell *et al.* (2002: 65) acknowledge a lack of agreement over the effects. Conversely, Meadowcroft (2001: 25), Cutts (2006: 223) and Copus (2007: 128) emphasise the party's long-established ideological attachment to the local, characterised by community politics. Denver (2001: 638) highlights internal tensions between national and local campaigning, where there may be an opportunity cost between making more substantial gains by

targeting winnable local seats, at the expense of gaining national popularity and a small number of seats. Cutts (2014: 363) and Johnson (2014: 202) argue that these two ideas are not necessarily incompatible, thus the tensions may be overstated. However, the academic literature covering ideology and its relationship with the Liberal Democrats' electoral prospects remains limited and under-researched.

As a result of the Liberal Democrats' inconsistent ideology and lack of a heartland of support, the party has tended to rely on distinctive policies and picking up protest votes to gain support (Russell and Fieldhouse 2000: 88; Fieldhouse and Russell 2001: 712; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 190-191; Cutts 2014: 361). However, Grayson (2005: 399-400) argues that one consequence of the Liberal Democrats' diverse support base means that there is likely to be a greater divergence in different parts of the country on specific policies. Thus, Grayson suggests that the party needs to develop a set of core values to minimise this impact.

To overcome the constraints of the structural and psychological credibility gap, Cutts (2006: 222), Cutts and Shryane (2006: 427), Cutts (2012: 96), Cutts (2014: 361) and Russell and Fieldhouse (2005: 9) concur that local seat targeting, relative to the other parties, is imperative for Liberal Democrat success, through a process of local representation and grassroots activism. This allows the party to build up local representation incrementally, in the hope of turning local gains into national representation. Fieldhouse and Russell (2001: 735) and Cutts (2014: 377) argue that a necessary component of this strategy is intensive campaigning to mobilise supporters. It also allows the party to demonstrate that they are a credible alternative at running local councils, whilst minimising perceptions that they lack political experience (Cutts 2006: 222; Cutts 2014: 361). Cutts (2014: 362) argues that strong

local organisation is key to effectively targeting resources and maintaining a presence outside the election cycle. Moreover, Cutts (2006: 224) adds that having a strong local support base often acts as a catalyst for gaining support in previously non-winnable areas. Dorling *et al.* (1998: 64-65), Russell and Fieldhouse (2005: 9) and Cutts (2006: 224) agree that that the party can build on advances made in previous elections, whilst gaining credibility in one seat may spill over to neighbouring seats. However, Cutts (2006: 239) notes that intensive campaigning is not a foolproof strategy guaranteed to turn local council representation into national representation.

Once these seats had been gained, the most effective way the Liberal Democrats could maintain their parliamentary representation was through targeting seats where they benefited from incumbency and an existing strong local base (Johnson 2014: 202). Scholars are divided over the effects of incumbency. Searing (1985: 372-376) and Norris (1997: 46-47) concur that efforts of MPs at constituency level are not a strong determining factor in an MP's ability to be re-elected, whereas Smith (2013: 167) and Buck and Cain (1990: 140) agree that incumbent candidates have an advantage when re-elected. Notably, Buck and Cain's research suggests that the incumbent benefits from an average increase of 500-3000 votes.

However, Jackson (2008: 489) casts doubt on the exact electoral advantage that an incumbent brings. Despite this, research suggests that as the Liberal Democrats' representation grows, the benefits of incumbency reach a ceiling effect, reducing its influence (Harrison 2007: 143; Smith 2013: 171). Nevertheless, Johnson (2014: 206) acknowledges that incumbency still provides a significant benefit to the Liberal Democrats, due to candidates relying on personal appeal and local campaigning. Thus, whilst there is

some evidence to suggest that the incumbency effect benefits the Liberal Democrats, no academic consensus exists.

The Liberal Democrats are further disadvantaged by being unable to raise a substantial war chest in comparison to the other two main parties (Fisher 2001: 697; Fisher 2015: 150).

Fisher (2015: 151-152) and Cutts (2006: 222) agree that resource allocation and funding needs to be targeted to specific marginal seats where the Liberal Democrats could maintain, or gain representation. This is important for the party, as there is a lack of funding at a constituency level, evidenced by less than ten per cent of local associations reporting their financial income in 2012 (Johnson 2014: 205). Furthermore, Johnson argues that as a result of fluctuating membership between election cycles the party does not have a constant level of funding. However, Fisher (2015: 148) indicates that the impact of Liberal Democrat resource-orientated seat targeting has been reduced, as a result of the two main parties improving their micro-targeting of voters, channelling more funds into their marginal constituencies, instead of at a national level. A lack of available data on Liberal Democrat funding and membership has resulted in gaps in the existing literature.

In conclusion, after considering the literature on seat targeting and campaigning, it is evident that it is imperative for the Liberal Democrats to employ a strategy that can overcome the constraints of FPTP and the credibility gap. Moreover, it is essential for the party to be able to build on their incremental approach to attempt to create a heartland of support. This could lead to an incumbency benefit, although there is no academic consensus on the effectiveness. Funding and membership are necessary components in implementing the party's incremental strategy and ultimately gaining greater representation. Within the predominantly quantitative literature a number of gaps emerge, especially in the areas of

ideology and funding. This dissertation intends to fill these gaps by adopting a qualitative approach to crudely measure the efficacy of Rennardism.

Methodology

This methodology will outline and justify the use of triangulation in order to critically evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism. It will then identify and evaluate the criteria against which Rennardism will be measured. To be able to critically evaluate Rennardism, this dissertation adopts a case study approach. The advantages to this approach allow the researcher to thoroughly examine the case, formulate measurable criteria, as well as suggesting causality. However, caution needs to be taken when making wider generalisations based on a single case study (Burnham *et al.* 2008: 65-66; Halperin and Heath 2017: 214-215).

Within this case study framework, multiple information sources will be used to enable the researcher to identify patterns of convergence. This process, known as data triangulation will strengthen the case study approach, by evaluating primary, secondary sources and academic literature, in order to corroborate data obtained from different sources, cross-check findings, hence increasing the credibility and reliability of the research (Yin 2014: 126-128; Halperin and Heath 2017: 161). Through careful case selection and research design, this approach enables a nuanced discussion, evaluation of all aspects of the debate and the ability to make convincing inferences (Burnham *et al.* 2008: 186; Pierce 2008: 90).

Through triangulation of Rennard's own memoirs, *Winning Here* with Paddy Ashdown's diaries, *The Ashdown Diaries* in Chapter one and Greg Hurst's biography, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw* in Chapter two, this dissertation seeks to qualitatively evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism. The researcher recognises that there are significant advantages to using primary sources, including diaries and memoirs, which are critical to this research as these

actors are the key players involved in Liberal Democrat seat targeting in the period 1992-2005. Whilst diaries provide an account written at the time from the perspective of an individual, allowing the researcher to study the development of events over a given period, memoirs enable an overview of key events from a personal perspective and might uncover new facts and insights previously unknown (Mowat 1971: 85-86; Pierce 2008: 81). However, all sources, whether primary or secondary incorporate an element of bias, so must be critically analysed (Halperin and Heath 2017: 253). Diaries may suffer from exaggeration of events, the author's emotions working their way into diary entries, as well as the frequency of writing entries, which may affect reliability. In contrast, memoirs are not written at the time, which may produce an inaccurate recollection of events. Moreover, the benefit of hindsight may influence the author to paint events more favourably (Mowat 1971: 85-86).

One limitation to this research is the lack of a primary source for the triangulation of Rennard and Kennedy in Chapter two, which may reduce its reliability (Burnham *et al.* 2008: 192). Nevertheless, secondary sources, such as Greg Hurst's biography provide a valuable insight into events, although the researcher appreciates that events will only be covered if they have impacted on an individual's career. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that Hurst may have an inherent bias towards Kennedy, as a result of their relationship, or ideological standpoint (Burnham *et al.* 2008: 192). To strengthen the validity of this research, other surrogate sources, including biographies and autobiographies of leading figures will be consulted. Moreover, quantitative data from leading academics in this field, led by David Cutts, Edward Fieldhouse and Andrew Russell will be used to back up qualitative research. Whilst this will provide a more complete picture, it is important to be aware of the lack of representativeness of small case studies as the Liberal Democrats only

had sixty-two MPs during their high-water mark in 2005. With such small sample sizes these findings may not be replicable.

Following an initial analysis of the literature, the researcher decided that it would be beneficial to conduct a face-to-face elite-level interview with Chris Rennard to strengthen the triangulation process, increasing the robustness of the findings (Burnham *et al.* 2008: 232). A semi-structured approach, primarily using open-ended questions will be adopted, as this may elicit better responses from elites, who prefer to articulate freely, thus increasing the validity of responses (Aberbach and Rockman 2002: 674; Halperin and Heath 2017: 299). Furthermore, elite-level interviews provide the opportunity for the researcher to clarify points in Rennard's memoirs and gather further insights. Nevertheless, the researcher acknowledges that the validity of Rennard's responses must be taken into consideration, as responses may be biased, inaccurate, or exaggerated (Halperin and Heath 2017: 298-299).

To gain a different perspective on Rennardism and enhance the source material on Kennedy, Mark Pack (Liberal Democrat President/Co-Leader) and Stephen Tall (Liberal Democrat Councillor) were approached for a telephone interview, a research method which although lacking visual cues is cheaper and more time efficient (Halperin and Heath 2017: 279). The researcher was successful in obtaining two out of three interviews, namely Rennard and Pack, both of whom were insightful, providing some otherwise unobtainable information. However, this dissertation would benefit from further interviews with key individuals involved in the party's seat targeting and campaigning. Time limitations and dissertation length meant that this was not possible. Ideally, all three key actors, Rennard, Ashdown and Kennedy, would have been interviewed for this research project, but this was not feasible as two are deceased.

In order to evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism and bring out the tensions between Rennard, Ashdown and Kennedy, the researcher identified five criteria by which the effects of campaign effort can be measured. These criteria were selected as they filled a gap that emerged from the literature. It was decided that it was most appropriate to firstly consider the key actors' relationships and roles, followed by an evaluation of strategic and ideological tensions. From these tensions a number of measurable impacts emerge. Liberal Democrat resources will be evaluated at general elections, under the headings of funding and membership, before comparing resource allocation and impact of by-elections. The research focus will then consider how far Rennard's strategy was impacted by the party's limited resources. Finally, broader structural factors, including tactical voting and the Liberal Democrats' positioning as a protest party will be examined, in order to understand the wider context surrounding the criteria being evaluated.

In conclusion, this methodology has outlined a case study approach, using triangulation as the most appropriate way of qualitatively evaluating the efficacy of Rennardism from 1992 to 2005. The researcher appreciates that only crude measurements will be obtainable by taking a qualitative approach, but will use supporting secondary and surrogate data, either to substantiate, or challenge the findings of this research.

Chapter One – ‘The Big Breakthrough’

This chapter will critically evaluate Rennardism during the Ashdown years (1988-1999). It will focus on any tensions under the criteria of firstly their relationship and role, followed by their strategy and ideology, Liberal Democrat resources at general elections, under the headings of funding and membership, resource allocation and impact of by-elections and finally broader structural factors, including tactical voting and Liberal Democrat positioning as a protest party.

Firstly, it is important to consider Ashdown and Rennard’s working relationship and how it evolved over time to evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism. According to Rennard, during the 1980s the ‘relationship was very good’, whereas once Ashdown became leader (28 July 1988), it became ‘more variable at first’ (Marshall 2020a). Tensions arose over whether the party should contest the 1990 Eastbourne by-election, following the IRA’s murder of Ian Gow, a Conservative MP close to Margaret Thatcher. Whilst Ashdown took the principled position that the party should not contest the by-election, on the grounds that this would ‘allow the IRA to decide who was and was not an MP’ (Ashdown 2000: 92), Rennard insisted that no statement be made ‘without consulting the person responsible for organising the party’s by-election campaigns’ (Rennard 2018: 129-130). Despite Ashdown acknowledging that Rennard’s tone could have lost him his job, Archy Kirkwood (Campaigns and Communications Committee Chair) and Rennard convinced Ashdown that contesting the by-election was the right thing to do, resulting in a 4,500 majority (Ashdown 2000: 92, 94). Hence, Rennard’s assertiveness enabled him to exert a degree of influence over Ashdown from as early as 1990.

The level of trust increased after the 1992 General Election, following Rennard's 1993-1994 by-election victories (Rennard 2018: 179, 184, 191); the 22,000 landslide majority in Newbury was an unexpected victory for Ashdown (Ashdown 2000: 226). These victories resulted in the party endorsing Rennard's seat targeting strategy, as well as Ashdown seeking his advice on an 'increasingly regular basis' (Rennard 2018: 195). This eventually led to Rennard's admittance to the 'Jo Group', a group of Ashdown's senior advisors (Ashdown 2000: 278; Rennard 2018: 212), named after Ashdown's Press Secretary, Jo Phillips (Hurst 2006: 87), demonstrating a growing level of trust and an increased reliance on Rennard's input. However, Rennard acknowledges that their relationship was not without its tensions, as Ashdown initially saw Rennard 'as a local campaigner', rather than being 'so relevant to the national campaign', whereas Rennard viewed himself as a 'national campaigner' (Marshall 2020a).

Nevertheless, Rennard describes their relationship in the run up to the 1997 General Election as 'very strong', with the partnership helping to deliver forty-six seats (Marshall 2020a). However, it is difficult to assess who held greater power within the party. Whilst Ashdown has been perceived as dominating the party between 1992 and 1999, described as the 'party personified', his influence over the parliamentary party waned following its significant increase at the 1997 General Election (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 65, 70-71), with parliamentary meetings becoming more uncomfortable (Ashdown 2001: 150-151, 239). The power of party cadres, such as Rennard is harder to trace, but nevertheless is significant as the party's main objective of winning seats, combined with Rennard's seat targeting strategy, gave him large control over the party's messaging, resulting in him being 'revered' by party personnel (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 74-76). Thus, as Ashdown's influence

within the party declined, Rennard's influence over Ashdown and the party arguably increased following his by-election victories and successful 1997 General Election campaign.

Further tensions are evident when considering Ashdown and Rennard's differing positions on strategy and ideology. With regards to strategy, it is important to acknowledge that Rennard's seat targeting, based around community politics and grassroots activism, was not a new concept, having been a stalwart of Liberal campaigning, formalised by the Liberal Party Assembly in 1970 (Copus 2007: 128). However, although this strategy was not new, Rennard deserves credit for implementing best campaigning practices at a constituency level, producing a series of campaign booklets, benefiting the party during election campaigns (Rennard 2018: 72-73, 143-144).

Despite Rennard systematically improving campaign practices, a criticism of Rennardism is that the strategy's greater focus on local campaigning caused ideological tensions with the overarching national campaign (Denver 2001: 638). However, this criticism is not entirely accurate, as although tensions existed, their significance on the party's electoral performance may be overstated. This is evident in the 1992 General Election, where Rennard and the party formulated a tiered system of seat targeting, allocating more effort and resources to the top tier (Denver *et al.* 1998: 175). Simultaneously, the party's distinctive national campaign focused on the 'five Es': Economy, Education, Environment, Europe and Electoral Reform (Liberal Democrats 1992; Rennard 2018: 153). Rennard argues that this combination enabled him not only to follow and benefit from Trevor Jones' maxim, to 'find out the issues on people's minds and deal with those issues', it also allowed the party to harness distinctive policies to win over latent and tactical voters, whilst helping to minimise the effects of the 'credibility gap' (Marshall 2020a).

The effects of a combination of local and national campaigning were enhanced during the 1997 General Election. The party positioned themselves as a radical alternative to the two main parties (Russell and Fieldhouse 2000: 88) and under Rennard's increased input nationally, had a stronger seat targeting campaign (Rennard 2018: 211-212), resulting in the number of seats increasing from twenty in 1992 to forty-six, although their vote share dropped from eighteen to seventeen per cent (Denver *et al.* 1998: 175-176; Russell and Fieldhouse 2000: 86; Denver 2001: 638). Rennard attributes some of the 1997 breakthrough to the party establishing control locally, recalling that 'out of the twenty-five new gains, twenty-two were where the party controlled the local council, or were utterly dominant in local government' (Marshall 2020a). Hence, the seat targeting strategy and the national campaign worked in tandem, not only to win seats, but also to win over latent support and tactical voters through distinctive policies, whilst increasing the number of potential target seats for the 2001 General Election.

Rennard suggests that this is further evidenced by the party's subsequent abandonment of his seat targeting strategy in 2015, 2017 and 2019, whereby it adopted a 'more ambitious, more global strategy', only achieving eight, twelve and eleven seats respectively (Marshall 2020a). Thus, an effective seat targeting strategy in conjunction with a distinctive national campaign delivered a higher number of MPs, compared to a national strategy predominantly reliant on distinctive policies (Liberal Democrats 2017; Liberal Democrats 2019), indicating that Rennard's strategy did not necessarily cause tensions with the national campaign. However, Pack argues that as a result of the seat targeting strategy, 'it was quite often hard for the party to take a clear and consistent stance on certain issues' (Marshall 2020b). Pack recalls that tensions arose at his first federal conference as 'overall

the party was against lots of money being spent on roads', except for being 'in favour of some new roads in constituencies that had Liberal Democrat MPs' (Marshall 2020b), suggesting that there was an underlying tension, but not necessarily to the party's detriment.

A further potential flaw is that a critical point may be reached, where scalability of Rennard's seat targeting strategy may no longer be viable. This may partly be due to the heavy focus on local campaigning, detracting from the party's national policies and exposure (Brack 2011: 319). However, to gain the benefits from a more national oriented campaign, the party would require a significant national uniform swing, which is unlikely under FPTP (Denver 2001: 638). Furthermore, Rennard and Pack argue that the seat targeting strategy was not entirely based upon winning elections outright, rather reaching a point where the party held the 'balance of power' and could attempt to implement a more proportional electoral system (Marshall 2020a; Marshall 2020b).

Ideological tensions arose between Ashdown and Rennard, partly due to Ashdown's decision to follow in Jo Grimond's (Liberal Party Leader) footsteps, attempting to realign the left (Leaman 1998: 161; Meadowcroft 2000: 437), 'so an alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed' (Ashdown 1992). Beginning with the formal ending of 'equidistance' in May 1995 (Leaman 1998: 160; Ashdown 2000: 595-597), the party was able to align more with the Labour Party and the left under Ashdown and more with the Conservatives under the 'hands-off' leadership of Kennedy (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 41-44). This meant that the party had ideological inconsistencies and thus had to rely on distinctive policies to attract voters. However, tensions can be traced back to Ashdown's Chard speech (9 May 1992), where Rennard did not see the benefit of aligning with another party in an FPTP

system, nor did he agree with the Liberal Democrat leadership team publicly revealing their thinking on a closer association with the Labour Party (Rennard 2018: 169-170).

Ashdown's proposal to publicly state his intention of working with Labour in the future was reined back in 1992 and in the run up to the 1997 General Election, when the issue of a potential coalition reared its head, with Ashdown suggesting that the party 'will work with Labour where we agree with them' (Ashdown 2000: 542-543). Rennard acknowledges that as Ashdown was unable to follow through, the party maintained distinctive policies in 1997, focused around CHEESE (Crime, Health, Education, Economy, Sleaze and the Environment), gaining the support of tactical and latent voters (Marshall 2020a). According to Rennard, tensions arose over whether the party should campaign on the issue of health. Whilst Ashdown believed that 'health is Labour's issue, we should leave it alone', Rennard understood that the issue was key to the party's constituency campaigns (Marshall 2020a). Moreover, Ashdown's reining in minimised any potential effects on Rennard's strategy, protecting the party from haemorrhaging voters to the Labour Party and preventing the Conservatives getting in through the back door.

For Rennard's strategy to work effectively, the party needed to offer something different to attract voters. Ashdown's obsession with the 'Lib-Lab Project' ultimately failed when he put the cart before the horse, going against Rennard's bottom line that proportional representation (PR) was a prerequisite for a coalition deal (Ashdown 2001: 173; Rennard 2018: 243-244). Despite Rennard and Ashdown sharing the same end goal of implementing PR, Ashdown favoured achieving this with a Lib-Lab coalition, whereas Rennard was more interested in winning seats. Thus, when considering ideological tensions, the effects on

Rennard's strategy were minimal, as evidenced by the party's parliamentary advances.

However, if Ashdown had continued as leader, the impact may arguably have been greater.

It is important to consider the impact of resources, in particular funding and membership, on the efficacy of the party's seat targeting strategy and the national campaign. The Liberal Democrats have been hampered by their inability to raise similar levels of funds in comparison to the Conservative and Labour Party, partly due to the fact that they have a greater reliance on membership fees (Denver 2001: 638). At the 1992 General Election the Liberal Democrats reputedly spent £2.1 million, whilst the Labour Party spent £7.1 million, compared to the Conservatives £10.1 million (Butler and Kavanagh 1992: 260). During the 1997 General Election the figures were £3.5, £25.7 and £28.3 million respectively (Denver 2001: 638). Consequently, the party had limited funds to 'support and bolster campaigning' in their target seats (Rennard 2018: 142). Thus, at constituency level, expenditure for the Liberal Democrats was roughly half that of the two main parties in 1997, £1.9 million, compared with £3.8 and £3.9 million for Labour and the Conservatives (Denver 2001: 638). However, the preciseness of the party's seat targeting strategy is evidenced by Ashdown visiting twenty-seven out of the twenty-eight gains at the 1997 General Election (Rennard 2018: 222). Despite the effectiveness of the party's seat targeting campaign, limited funds meant that they could not support 'as many seats as Rennard would have liked' (Rennard 2018: 201). Thus, if the party had raised greater levels of funding under Rennard's targeting strategy, it is possible they could have won a larger number of seats.

Moreover, Rennard (2018: 230) argues that there is a 'very clear correlation between a high and active membership and winning at parliamentary level'. Thus, high membership figures are necessary for the party's success and ability to run effective local campaigns.

Table 1 illustrates record membership levels in the period 1992-1994, peaking at 101,000, following by-election successes in 1993-1994 (Pack 2019). Additionally, it illustrates the party's ability to mobilise support in and around election time. With limited membership and funding resources, seat targeting is key, as most seats gained in 1992 had 500 members or more (Rennard 2018: 201). Hence, Rennard's strategy was a core component of the party's success in the 1990s.

Table 1: Liberal Democrat Membership Figures, 1988-1999

Year	Membership	Change On Year
1988	80,000	-
1989	81,000	+1,000
1990	77,000	-4,000
1991	91,000	+14,000
1992	101,000	+10,000
1993	101,000	0
1994	101,000	0
1995	94,000	-7,000
1996	99,000	+5,000
1997	87,000	-12,000
1998	89,000	+2,000
1999	83,000	-6,000

Source: Pack (2019) Liberal Democrat Membership Figures, 1988-2019.

Note: Membership figures for 1988-1999 are rounded off at end of year.

By-election victories played a significant role in determining the party's electoral success during the Ashdown years. This is evidenced in Table 2, with a run of victories in Newbury (1993), Christchurch (1993), Eastleigh (1994) and Littleborough and Saddleworth (1995). Rennard and Ashdown attribute winning by-elections as an effective way of increasing national exposure, improving the party's opinion poll ratings (Ashdown *et al.* 2015: 455; Rennard 2018: 143), with Pack arguing that they give the party 'bursts of national prominence' (Marshall 2020b). Rennard (2018: 202) states that following the four

successful by-election victories during the 1992-1997 Parliament, the party saw their opinion poll ratings increase from sixteen to twenty-two per cent. Thus, by-election victories help to keep the party relevant in between elections and in the words of David Penhaligon (Liberal MP), they provide the 'life-blood of the party' (Penhaligon cited in Rennard 2018: 98). Hence, by-elections are a good example of Rennardism in practice, where a well-resourced campaign can be run. However, questions arise over the model's scalability, as Rennard argues that when his attention was diverted to other seats during a general election campaign, constituencies such as Christchurch were narrowly lost (Marshall 2020a).

Table 2: By-elections, 1992-1997 Parliament

Year	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Constituency						
Newbury	Conservative	Lib Dem				Lib Dem
Christchurch	Conservative	Lib Dem				Conservative
Eastleigh	Conservative		Lib Dem			Lib Dem
Littleborough & Saddleworth	Conservative			Lib Dem		n/a

Source: The Times Guide to the House of Commons (1997).

Note: Littleborough and Saddleworth constituency abolished in 1997. Merged with Oldham East and Saddleworth and Rochdale.

The party's electoral fortunes also benefited from tactical voting and their positioning as a protest party. This can be demonstrated by the Lib-Lab anti-Conservative pact in the run-up to and during the 1997 General Election, where the Liberal Democrats, or the Labour Party would stand down in their respective marginal seats with the Conservative Party (Ashdown 2000: 513-514; Rennard 2018: 218-219). This approach was vindicated by the Liberal Democrats winning twenty out of twenty-two Lib-Con marginal seats (Rennard 2018: 218-219). Thus, tactical voting helped the party bridge and overcome the constraints of the psychological 'credibility gap'. However, it is difficult to measure what percentage of Liberal

Democrat voters in 1992 and 1997 voted for tactical reasons. Even when considering 'new' Liberal Democrat tactical voting, the extent is estimated to be around three per cent (Berrington and Hague 1997: 561), suggesting that the salience of tactical voting may not be so significant. Nevertheless, when combined with Rennard's seat targeting strategy, concentrating funds on winnable constituencies, the party's electoral prospects were significantly increased and may have contributed to its high-water mark during Ashdown's leadership (Berrington and Hague 1997: 562; Brack 2011: 322).

In conclusion, Rennard's strategy during the Ashdown years was on the whole able to flourish, especially with the growing partnership between Rennard and Ashdown. This was particularly evident after 1994, when both the party and Ashdown embraced Rennard's strategy, as they worked in tandem with distinctive policies to reduce the squeeze of FPTP and convert votes into seats. However, the party's electoral advances were hampered by a small membership and substantially less funding in comparison to the other two main parties. The effects of Ashdown's ideological obsession with the left had little impact on Rennard's strategy, but acted as a distraction and may have prevented the party making further gains at the 1997 General Election. Having examined Rennard's strategy during the Ashdown period, this dissertation will now consider the efficacy of the strategy under Charles Kennedy's leadership.

Chapter Two – ‘The High-Water Mark’

This chapter will critically evaluate Rennardism during the Kennedy years (1999-2005), focusing on any tensions under the criteria of firstly their relationship and role, followed by their strategy and ideology, Liberal Democrat resources at general elections, under the headings of funding and membership, resource allocation and impact of by-elections and finally broader structural factors, including tactical voting and Liberal Democrat positioning as a protest party.

To evaluate the efficacy of Rennardism, it is firstly important to establish how Kennedy and Rennard’s working relationship evolved over time. According to Pack, Kennedy and Rennard had an effective partnership, as ‘both acknowledged that the other was expert at something very important’. Thus, whilst Kennedy was able to ‘charm’ the electorate, Rennard’s expertise lay in organising campaigns. Nevertheless, although the relationship was ‘good, strong and ultimately very successful’, there were tensions (Marshall 2020b). Rennard recalls that Kennedy was nervous about him ‘knowing about his alcohol problem’, whereas in reality Rennard realised the ‘scale of the problem’ (Marshall 2020a). This meant that Kennedy’s key staff shielded him from public view during the first three or four years of his leadership (Hurst 2006: 172; Campbell 2008: 155). Hence, key figures within the party, including Rennard did not always have sufficient access to Kennedy.

Moreover, Rennard argues that another consequence of Kennedy’s alcohol problem was that he was ‘inconsistent’, meaning that at times ‘he just was not really able to perform’, often missing events, whereas at other times ‘he could be brilliant at focusing on the issue’ (Marshall 2020a). This was evident during the 2005 manifesto launch, with Rennard fearing

that Kennedy's poor performance would be a liability to the campaign. Organising and planning a media grid around Kennedy's health issues made it more difficult for Rennard and the campaign staff to keep Kennedy on message. However, Kennedy's performance recovered well, becoming the asset he had been in 2001 (Campbell 2008: 223-224; Rennard 2018: 364). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the intensified level of scrutiny associated with being leader affected Kennedy's self-confidence and thus in conjunction with his health issues impacted his performances (Hurst 2006: 173).

Rennard argues that the relationship did not change a great deal when he became party CEO (Marshall 2020a). However, as Kennedy was often not in a good position to listen to MPs or candidates' grievances, Rennard recalls that he took on the role of counsellor to 'fix things for Charles' (Marshall 2020a). Nevertheless, Kennedy was sometimes 'less functional', meaning that there was a 'vacuum' of power within the party, resulting in Rennard driving the party messaging and preventing it from stalling. Moreover, Rennard argues that once he became CEO, this gave him 'more control over some of the levers of power' (Marshall 2020a). Hence, party personnel viewed Rennard as having more control than Ashdown and Kennedy combined (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005: 75). Thus, whilst Rennard supported Kennedy through this challenging period, he was also able to amass a considerable power base, supported by successful election campaigns in 2001 and 2005.

Further tensions are apparent when considering Kennedy and Rennard's differing positions on strategy and ideology. With regards to strategy, under Kennedy's leadership, Rennard faced different problems. Firstly, it was harder for the party to win target seats from the Conservatives and fend off a potential Conservative revival with Labour now in government (Rennard 2018: 277). Secondly, the party was in an unprecedented position, where they had

the dilemma of attempting to hold onto the forty-six seats gained in 1997, or try to make further gains, without spreading the party's resources too thinly (Denver *et al.* 2002: 161, 168).

Nevertheless, Rennard formulated an effective seat targeting strategy, aiming to maintain previous gains, whilst attempting to establish the party nationwide (Rennard 2002: 76; Rennard 2018: 278). This strategy was vindicated, as the party gained a foothold in the East Midlands constituency of Chesterfield, hoping to benefit in future elections from a spill over effect in neighbouring constituencies (Hurst 2006: 138). This worked in conjunction with the party's national campaign, fronted by Kennedy, which as Rennard recalls, predominantly focused on 'bread and butter' issues (Marshall 2020a), evidenced by the party's 2001 manifesto, entitled *Freedom, Justice, Honesty* (Liberal Democrats 2001), focusing on funding public services, through greater levels of taxation (Fisher 2002: 71; Newby 2002: 114; Hurst 2015: 398). Kennedy used Rennard's core messaging formula (Rennard 2002: 79-80), combined with his own gambit, 'what you see is what you get' (Newby 2002: 114), allowing the party to move from a position of 'constructive opposition' to one of 'effective opposition' to the Labour Government, whilst also helping to distinguish the Liberal Democrats (Denver 2001: 646; Rennard 2002: 78). Thus, the party's successful seat targeting and national campaign enabled them to retain twenty-six out of the twenty-eight gains made in 1997, with the two seats lost - Taunton and the Isle of Wight - ignoring Rennard's campaigning strategy (Hurst 2006: 138-139; Rennard 2018: 279-280).

Arguably, the successful 2001 General Election campaign strengthened Rennard's influence over the party's campaigning culture. Moreover, Rennard's influence over the party's messaging and overarching strategy was further consolidated when he became CEO, giving

him greater steer over the successful 2005 campaign (Grayson 2005: 396). However, Rennard argues this meant that he had to 'let go of more of the target strategy and the campaigns in the constituencies' (Marshall 2020a).

One criticism of the party's strategy during the 2005 campaign was that they inflated their polling figures, setting unrealistic expectations (Rennard 2007: 34; Rennard 2018: 370), with some members anticipating an extra fifteen to twenty gains, from both Conservatives and Labour (Hurst 2006: 217). Despite this, the party ran an effective seat targeting campaign, attempting to maximise the number of seats and votes, whilst capitalising on a decade of campaigning in some Liberal Democrat held constituencies, often benefiting from incumbency (Rennard 2007: 33; Rennard 2018: 370). In 2005, this ran alongside a relatively high-profile national campaign (Russell 2005: 89-90), focusing on improving the delivery of public services through *The Real Alternative* manifesto (Liberal Democrats 2005). This successful campaign enabled the party to win sixty-two seats, increasing their vote share to 22.1 per cent (Rennard 2007: 33). Hence, Rennard's seat targeting strategy, combined with a distinctive 2001 and high-profile 2005 campaign helped the party reach its high-water mark under Kennedy's leadership.

However, the efficacy of Rennard's seat targeting strategy in the 2005 campaign was arguably weakened by Conservative and Labour's increased reliance on the Liberal tradition of grassroots campaigning (Grayson 2005: 399-400; Rennard 2018: 370). This was most noticeable in fifteen of the party's Conservative target seats, where the party only won two seats, Taunton and Westmorland and Lonsdale. Despite the Liberal Democrat vote share increasing in the remaining thirteen, the Conservative vote increased by a larger margin (Grayson 2005: 398). Thus, the party's ability to make further gains during the 2005 General

Election was hampered by the strength of Conservative and Labour's local campaigns. Furthermore, another salient consideration, Pack argues was that the party's electoral strategy was based on 'thinking of constituencies', rather than focusing on a 'slice of the electorate' (Marshall 2020b). Hence, this winning seat by seat approach made it more difficult for the party to establish a core voter base. Nevertheless, the party's distinctive policy to abolish university tuition fees in 2005 enabled the party to win six target seats near major universities (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2005: 84), suggesting that its distinctive policies, combined with Rennard's seat targeting strategy helped move the party from protest nearer to power.

Ideological tensions between Rennard and Kennedy were less pronounced than they had been under Ashdown, Pack suggests partly due to Kennedy lacking the 'personal chemistry' with Tony Blair that had dominated his predecessor's latter years (Marshall 2020b).

However, Rennard acknowledges that Kennedy was better positioned to exploit the 'mood of growing disenchantment with Blair'. Kennedy realised that the party had 'pulled their punches' with Labour in government, needing to gradually distinguish themselves during the 2001 and 2005 campaigns, whilst attempting not to alienate tactical Labour supporters (Hurst 2006: 142; Marshall 2020a). Thus, Kennedy's ideological positioning of the party arguably aided Rennard's strategy, due to the party's greater distinction from Labour, which may not have been so credible had Ashdown still been leader.

Interestingly, Pack argues that Kennedy was less interested in ideology, suggesting that he lacked the 'passion about the detail of policy', which had positively 'oozed' from Ashdown (Marshall 2020b). Although Kennedy lacked policy detail, his ideological philosophy was rooted in his 'social democratic instincts', coupled with a 'classically Liberal focus on the

individual' (Hurst 2006: 119). Rennard suggests that these core values enabled Kennedy to empathise with the electorate on key issues, describing Kennedy as having 'hidden antennae' (Marshall 2020a). Occasionally, Kennedy expressed his 'passionate liberal' views on Europe and immigration, instead of focusing on salient voter issues, but most of the time, Kennedy's ability to empathise with voters complemented Rennard's focus on 'bread and butter' issues in the party's target constituencies (Marshall 2020a).

As with the Ashdown era, another important area to consider is the lack of resources, in particular funding and membership, on the efficacy of the party's seat targeting strategy and the national campaign. At the 2001 General Election a national spending cap was introduced, although its effects were negligible in helping to reduce the disparity in funding between the main parties. This meant that the party was still significantly disadvantaged in 2001 and 2005 (Denver 2001: 638). In the 2001 General Election the Liberal Democrats reputedly spent £2.5 million, less than in 1997 due to a £500,000 deficit, whereas Labour and the Conservatives spent £23,696,932 combined (Fisher 2001: 697; Electoral Commission 2002). During the 2005 General Election the parties raised around £4, £9 and £8 million respectively (Grayson 2005: 397-398). Consequently, the Liberal Democrats' 2001 national campaign was minimal, focusing predominantly on Kennedy visiting target seats. Nevertheless, this strategy was vindicated as fifty-two of the reputed seventy target seats were won (Fisher 2002: 73).

At constituency level, the party found it difficult financing a national campaign, as well as supporting held and target seats. However, Rennard increased the funding for target seats from four per cent in 1992 (£120,000), to forty per cent in 2001 (£1 million), keeping seat targeting funding comparable with the successful 1997 campaign (Rennard 2018: 281-282).

Conversely, the party had a greater outlay on their national campaign throughout the 2005 General Election, spending an unprecedented £100,000 on advertising (Russell 2005: 89). Thus, the prominence of Rennard’s seat targeting campaign was supported by a better funded national campaign. Hence, the party not only gained and held onto target seats, they also brought more constituencies into play via their increased vote share.

High membership figures are an essential component of the party’s ability to raise funds. This was particularly problematic during the 2001 General Election, where the limited election budget was impacted by a sharp fall in membership, from 87,000 in 1997 to 73,276 in 2001, a drop of 15.77 per cent (Hurst 2006: 135; Pack 2019). Table 3 illustrates that the party was able to increase its membership during election years, as evidenced in 2001 and 2010, whilst remaining relatively stable in 2005. Thus, higher membership figures are an important asset for the party, not only for delivering campaign material, but also helping to flood target seats to ‘get the vote out’ on election day (Denver *et al.* 2002: 170-171). Thus, higher levels of membership were beneficial to Rennard’s seat targeting strategy.

Table 3: Liberal Democrat Membership Figures, 2000-2010

Year	Membership	Change On Year
2000	69,000	-
2001	73,276	+4,276
2002	71,636	-1,640
2003	73,305	+1,669
2004	72,271	-1,034
2005	72,031	-240
2006	68,743	-3,288
2007	65,400	-3,343
2008	59,810	-5,590
2009	58,768	-1,042
2010	65,038	+6,270

Source: Pack (2019) Liberal Democrat Membership Figures, 1988-2019.
 Note: Membership figures for 2000 are rounded off at end of year. Exact figures have been used since 2001.

By-elections can be an integral component in increasing the party and the leader’s public appeal. These were particularly important under Kennedy’s leadership, as the frequency of winnable by-elections significantly decreased (Hurst 2006: 114). Nevertheless, as Table 4 indicates, the party’s significant victory in Romsey (2000), overturning a Conservative majority of 8,500 (Fisher 2002: 69) was imperative, as it demonstrated that they could still win seats from the Conservatives, even though they were no longer in government. Pack argues that this victory also ‘reinforced’ Kennedy’s position as a ‘reasonably successful leader’ (Marshall 2020b).

Table 4: By-elections, 2000-2006

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Constituency							
Romsey	Lib Dem	Lib Dem				Lib Dem	
Brent East		Labour		Lib Dem		Lib Dem	
Birmingham Hodge Hill		Labour			Labour	Labour	
Leicester South		Labour			Lib Dem	Labour	
Hartlepool		Labour			Labour	Labour	
Dunfermline and West Fife		Labour				Labour	Lib Dem

Source(s): The Times Guide to the House of Commons (2001, 2005, 2010).

Furthermore, Rennard used the Romsey by-election to road test effective themes for the 2001 General Election, as well as providing a ‘model campaign for other target seats’ (Rennard 2018: 275). Moreover, the party’s victories in Brent East (2003) and Leicester South (2004) showed their ability to win against Labour in its heartlands, losing narrowly by less than 500 votes in Birmingham Hodge Hill on the same day as Leicester South (Russell 2005: 95; Rennard 2007: 34; Rennard 2011: 173). Following Kennedy’s resignation, the party’s electoral credibility was restored by their Dunfermline and West Fife (2006) victory,

bringing them up to their high-water mark of sixty-three MPs (Hurst 2006: 242; Rennard 2011: 172; Rennard 2018: 416-417). Thus, Rennard's strategy exemplifies how 'winning here' had really mattered in by-election victories (Rennard 2018: 417).

The party's electoral fortunes also benefited from tactical voting and their positioning as a protest party. Tactical voting played a smaller role in the 2001 General Election, as the party could no longer rely on tactical Labour votes to defeat the Conservatives (Denver 2001: 642). However, in 2005, the party benefited from protest votes, resulting from some Labour Party supporters' dissatisfaction with a lack of progress in public services, but primarily due to Blair's controversial decision to invade Iraq (Crewe 2006: 217; Fieldhouse *et al.* 2006: 91; Curtice 2007: 124). Kennedy adopted a distinctive anti-war stance, helping to raise his and the party's public appeal (Hurst 2006: 166; Campbell 2008: 204). Thus, the distinctive policies which attracted tactical and protest voters complemented Rennard's seat targeting strategy, enabling the party to reach its high-water mark under Kennedy's leadership.

In conclusion, Rennard's strategy during the Kennedy years was successful as a result of their complementary skill sets. This was particularly evident during the Romsey by-election, where victory boosted Kennedy's appeal, strengthening Rennard's power over the Liberal Democrats' campaigning strategy. Consequently, the party was able to gain sixteen seats in the period 1997-2005, even in the face of a change in opposition. Despite this, the party suffered from a lower membership base and funding compared to the Conservatives and Labour. Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats' increased budget in 2005, together with Kennedy's more hostile stance towards the Labour Party helped it to flourish and thus had little impact on Rennard's strategy.

Conclusion

Having examined Rennard's seat targeting strategy during the Kennedy period, this dissertation will now draw conclusions from Chapters one and two on the efficacy of Rennard's strategy, make some normative judgements on the party's future electoral strategy and outline its contribution to the field of study.

Rennard's campaigning strategy under Ashdown and Kennedy's leadership was able to grow and develop into an effective seat targeting strategy, aided by both leaders' productive working relationship with Rennard. Kennedy's intuitive ability to empathise with voters arguably supported Rennard's strategy more, as he was able to relate to voters on salient, core issues, as opposed to Ashdown's more abstract approach.

On a strategic level, the notion that there were tensions between Rennard's seat targeting strategy and the party's national campaign was often overstated, with Rennard working in tandem with a distinctive national campaign in 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005, to win over tactical and latent voters. This is evidenced by the party progressing from twenty MPs in 1992 to the party's high-water mark of sixty-two MPs in 2005.

One criticism of Rennard's strategy, Pack argues is its focus on 'constituencies', rather than on a 'slice of the electorate' (Marshall 2020b). Nevertheless, this is a necessity for a third party to gain credibility and overcome the effects of FPTP. However, the strategy was not solely to win elections, but to reach a 'balance of power', moving towards a proportional system.

Ideological tensions under both leaders did not have a significant impact on Rennard's strategy, although if Ashdown had continued as leader the party's electoral prospects may have suffered. In terms of funding and membership, the party's lack of resources in comparison to the other two main parties hindered Rennard's ability to target as many seats as he would have liked. Pack argues that by-election victories were significant to the party, as they helped keep it relevant, giving them a 'burst of national prominence' in between elections (Marshall 2020b). Despite the impact of tactical voting and protest voters being minimal, they worked in conjunction with Rennard's strategy to make electoral gains.

In the light of these conclusions, following the party's poor performances and abandonment of Rennardism during the 2015, 2017 and 2019 General Elections, where the party gained eight, twelve and eleven seats respectively, some normative statements on the party's future electoral strategy will be discussed. The party should return to Rennard's incremental seat targeting strategy. As Rennard rightly points out, under Nick Clegg's leadership in 2015, the party adopted a strategy which disregarded the 'importance of the local machinery, local council, councillors, case work and local campaigning issues' (Marshall 2020a).

Moreover, Rennard argues that the Liberal Democrats' lack of distinctiveness during the 2015 General Election also contributed to its downfall, as when the party is perceived as being too close to one or other of the two main parties, it has been seen as a 'time of great peril' (Marshall 2020a). However, the efficacy of Rennard's seat targeting strategy may have been reduced due to the other two main parties improving their local constituency campaigns. Thus, the party may find it more difficult to re-establish itself at the next General

Election in 2024, compared to Rennard's most successful period in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the party should learn from its past and return to its fruitful grassroots campaigning strategy, formalised by the Liberal Party Assembly in 1970.

This dissertation fills a qualitative gap in the literature by crudely measuring the efficacy of Rennardism, contributing to the existing quantitative research on seat targeting. One major limitation is the lack of a primary source for the triangulation of Rennard and Kennedy in Chapter two, increasing the reliance on surrogate sources. Further research could replicate this study, focusing on the period 2010-2019, or be expanded by conducting further interviews with Rennard, Ashdown's and Kennedy's back room staff to improve the reliability and robustness of the findings.

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