University of Glasgow

McGuigan, Natalie Margaret (2015) *An analysis of the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats during the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition.* [MSc]

http://endeavour.gla.ac.uk/67/

School of Social and Political Sciences

An analysis of the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats during the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition.

September 2015

GUID: 2164854

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of MSc in Political Communication

Word Count 11,845

Turnitin ID:

Contents

'The little party always gets smashed' (Angela Merkel 2010, Chancellor of Germany).

INTRODUCTION:

Coalition parties in coalition governments, face the difficult challenge of managing two competing demands, namely; the need to appear unified with their coalition partner and stable in government, and the parallel need to retain their distinctiveness and individual appeal as a separate party. It can be said that the electoral viability of a coalition party depends on maintaining their distinctiveness and yet paradoxically the effectiveness of a coalition government is most guaranteed when unity within the coalition prevails. This presents an exceptional challenge to parties foraying into coalition or multiparty governments. Thus, coalition scholars have coined this problem the 'unity-distinctiveness dilemma' (Boston and Bullock 2010).

As such, a handful of scholars in recent years have explored how parties have tried to alleviate this problem. Most pertinently, some scholars have turned to look at how parties utilize *political communication* as a way of addressing this issue and mitigating the problem that the unity-distinctiveness dilemma poses. Some have explored how parties harness political communication in different ways to differentiate their party's values or policies while at the same time not compromising unity within the coalition. Others have looked at how parties use legislative speeches to communicate with their constituents, to highlight their policy triumphs or use them as an opportunity to 'justify unpalatable policy compromises' (Martin and Vanberg 2008: 504).

Integral to this study, Kluver and Sagarzazu (2012) found through an extensive analysis of German party press releases that coalition parties in Germany tailor their political communication to the electoral cycle, in order to 'accommodate both imperatives' of retaining a distinct profile and ensuring unity and stability in government (Kluver and Sagarzazu, 2012:2). Kluver and Sagarzazu (2012) assert that coalition parties characteristically differentiate on policies at the beginning of the coalition as they emphasise the key policies they are enacting, they then align and

unify in the middle of the coalition when they 'focus on enacting a common policy agenda' (Kluver and Sagarzazu 2012: 5) and differentiate at the end of the coalition, highlighting their policy strengths as elections approach.

Whilst this seems sound, it must be asked, how universal is this political communication strategy in coalition governments, and does this pattern hold true in different types of coalitions? Thus, this study seeks to explore this aspect of coalition parties' political communication strategy further and examine it in the particular context of the recent Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in Britain.

This study will analyse the Liberal Democrats' political communication strategy as the junior coalition partner in the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Thus, the overall question that leads through this work asks:

To what extent did the electoral cycle determine the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats during the coalition government?

This study seeks to explore this issue through an analysis of all press releases issued by the Liberal Democrats during the coalition from 2010-2015 and their leader Nick Clegg's party conference speeches from 2010-2014. In doing so, this study hopes to draw inferences and conclusions regarding their political communication strategy by analyzing the sentiment of the press releases and party conference speeches and by analyzing the issues and policies they talk about.

1.1:Coalition Governments in Britain and the 2010 Coalition Government

The 2010 Conservative-Lib Dem coalition presents an interesting case study for examining the political communication strategy of a coalition party for a number of reasons. Britain, alike with Spain, remains distinct in Europe in its relative lack of experience of coalition governments. In the great majority of Western European states, 'coalition politics is, at the very least an occasional occurrence, and in some states like Germany, the order of the day' (Laver and Shepsle, 2003:3). However, the nature of British parliamentary politics and its electoral system is architected in such a way to specifically rule out multi-party governments and produce a strong single party government from the two-party system.

In the post war period this has been largely successful, with the last hung parliament in Britain occurring in 1974 and lasting 8 months before a snap election that consolidated Labour Party rule. However, the electoral outcome of the 2010 General Election presented significant challenges to a country that had no electoral history or tradition of coalition governments. It also presented significant challenges to the two parties partaking in the coalition, one of whom had been out of power for 13 years and the other that had no experience of government in the post-war period.

More specifically, the coalition government posed significant challenges for the Liberal Democrat party, for a number of reasons. The outcome of the election was anti-climactic for the Liberal Democrats, who unexpectedly won fewer seats than they had in previous elections, despite polls predicting a large swing to the left. Thus, strategically the party was not internally prepared for a coalition, having ruled this possibility out months before the general election (Guardian 14/02/10), with leader, Nick Clegg leader stating he was preparing to lead a minority government. Furthermore, a coalition with the Conservatives posed considerable reputational challenges to the Liberal Democrats by allying themselves with a party perceived to be ideologically opposed to their political aims and values, and one that was still struggling to shed its 'nasty party' image, and reputation as the 'party of the rich' (Guardian: 08/10/02). This feeling is most clearly identified in a poll by Ipsos Mori of Liberal Democrat voters the day before the election that showed most Liberal Democrat voters and supporters defined themselves as being on 'the left', with just

22% of Liberal Democrats favouring a coalition with the Conservatives, but 40% preferring to work with Labour (Guardian: 10/05/10). As well as this, both parties had the equal pressure of coming up with a common policy agenda that was attractive and palatable to both parties internally and to the wider public (Kluver and Sagarzazu, 2012:1).

Still, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives entered into the coalition government, pledging to put aside politics and work 'together in the national interest' (Atkins 2015:1). However, the difficulties that coalition government presented to the Liberal Democrats are most clearly explicated through the polling figures for the party throughout the coalition, which diminished considerably as time went by. (See Table 1) These polling figures will be also referred to in later arguments.

Table 1.

Data illustrates polled voting intentions for the Liberal Democrats between 2010-2015

Date	Opinion Poll	Result
23/05/2010	ICM for the Guardian	21%
29/09/2010	ICM for the Guardian	18%
21/11/2010	ICM for the Guardian	14%
17/04/2011	ICM for the Guardian	15%
19/06/2011	ICM for the Guardian	12%
09/09/2011	Yougov/ Sunday Times	10%
11/11/2011	Yougov/ Sunday Times	9%
13/04/2012	Yougov/ Sunday Times	10%
08/09/2012	YouGov/ Sunday Times	9%
16/12/2012	Opinium for the Observer	8%
20/04/2013	Opinium for the Observer	8%
07/09/2013	Opinium for the Observer	7%
06/12/2013	Yougov/ Sunday Times	10%
25/04/2014	Yougov/ Sunday Times	9%
19/09/2014	Yougov/ Sunday Times	7%
06/12/2014	Opinium for the Observer	6%
31/01/2015	Opinium for the Observer	5%
28/02/2015	Opinium for the Observer	6%
28/03/2015	Opinium for the Observer	8%
02/05/2015	Opinium for the Observer	8%

In addition, recent analysis of Clegg's management of Liberal Democrats' strategy highlights that the party was juggling many demands in the first months of coalition government. As the first junior coalition partner in Britain, Clegg faced the competing demands of 'establishing the credibility of the party as a party of government, (thus entrenching three party politics), establishing the credibility of coalition as a form of government (thus reinforcing the first aim) and attempting to maintain a distinct identity from the Conservatives' (Mike Finn in Seldon eds., 2015: 496). Thus, unlike other parties in Europe with a tradition and past of coalition politics, the Liberal Democrats had larger demands on their plate, in terms of entrenching their credibility as a party and communicating their pivotal role in government.

1.2 Coalition Agreement:

In terms of policies, the coalition agreement secured and enshrined a number of key policies for the forthcoming legislative agenda. Quinn, Bara and Bartle (2011) conclude that the Conservatives 'secured all of their 'red line' policies: reducing the deficit, not being 'soft' on immigration, strong on defence and Euroscepticism' (Quinn, Bara and Bartle, 2011:19). Comparatively, the Liberal Democrats managed to make big gains in four primary priorities in their manifesto, namely 'fairer taxes, a pupil premium, a green economy and political reforms' (Quinn, Bara and Bartle, 2011:19). Furthermore, Quinn et al comment that the coalition agreement was collaborative, and in areas where there were genuine differences 'the parties devised pragmatic solutions such as agreements to disagree', or deferred dates for policy reviews (Quinn, Bara and Bartle, 2011:19).

In terms of the two parties ideologies, there are pockets of overlap; with 'a commitment to freedom common to both, but fairness primarily associated with the Liberal Democrats and responsibility with the Conservatives' (Atkins, 2015: 86). Still, the policies the Liberal Democrats campaigned for in the 2010 election did not highly resonate with the proposed Conservative agenda. The Liberal Democrats prioritised four key issues namely: fairer taxes, more chances for children from poorer backgrounds, a fairer and greener economy and cleaning up politics through political

and electoral reform (BBC 14/04/10). Their proposed flagship policies were a rise in the lowest band income tax threshold, a pupil premium fund for children from poorer backgrounds including free school meals, an economy funded by green jobs, scrapping trident, and political reform including a referendum for a more proportional electoral system.

Section 2.1 Literature Review:

Academic literature on coalition governments has predominantly concentrated on two areas of coalition research; firstly the formation of coalitions, and secondly the functioning of coalitions (See Muller and Strom's 2003 comparative study of coalition governments in Europe for an extensive overview).

Specifically, research has focused on the process of forming coalitions with studies analyzing in depth various coalition agreements (for example Quinn, Bara and Bartle 2011) to the initial coalition bargaining process (Schermann and Ensser-Jedenastik 2014). Similarly, a great deal of research has also been devoted to the study of the distribution of ministerial positions and policy briefs across coalition partners and how this affects and determines an individual party's overall influence on government and policy making (See Muller, Strom and Bergman 2010, Back, Debus and Dumont 2011, McEnhill 2015). Understandably, the division of policy briefs between coalition partners has a significant impact on the balance of power within a coalition.

Likewise, a smaller body of research by party scholars has focused on political parties and their ideologies, analyzing the likelihood of different parties becoming successful coalition partners. Additionally, a great deal of literature has also been devoted to comparatively analyzing the overall success or nonsuccess of coalitions. However, this body of work has been critiqued as most frequently these studies on government survival have been viewed 'through the static prism of factors that are fixed at the point of government formation such as the coalitions size or ideological compatibility' (Martin and Vanberg, 2008:502). Still, some research has been undertaken on the day to day governing of coalition governments, but predominantly in terms of the functioning of various control mechanisms that may be enacted during coalition governments (Boston and Bullock 2010).

Surprisingly little time has been dedicated to the political communication of multi-party governments or individual coalition partners, and how parties strategically position themselves via their communications strategy in coalition government. Conversely, research into the political communication of single-party governments

has dominated this field of study both in America and the UK. Research on the political communication strategy of presidential campaigns and British parliamentary campaigns are extensive and commonplace. However, there is a significant dearth in the literature on the political communication of coalition parties.

2.2 Governmental Unity- Party Distinctiveness Dilemma

A number of coalition scholars have focused on the central dilemma that coalition parties face when in government that is salient to this study. Namely a party's need 'to demonstrate unity in the coalition in order to maintain and strengthen the government' and the parallel need to also 'maintain and emphasise their own distinctive profile' (Kluver and Sagarzazu, 2012:5) to sustain their core voter base. The successful management of this 'governmental unity- party distinctiveness dilemma' is considered to be important to all parties involved in a governance arrangement (Boston and Bullock, 2010:251), and integral to maintaining a party's electoral viability. However, to 'successfully reconcile' these two imperatives of coalition government without appearing divisive or provoking disunity within government presents a significant challenge to parties entering into coalitions.

As such, some coalition scholars within the coalition literature have explored this unity-distinctiveness dilemma in the context of coalition formation specifically focusing on coalition agreements (Quinn, Bara and Bartle 2011, Muller and Strom 2003). The issue of cabinet unity is a significant problem amongst coalition partners with differing or conflicting policy preferences. As such, academics have found that control mechanisms outlined in coalition agreements are a method frequently employed to mitigate personal conflict and policy conflicts amongst coalition partners (Falco-Gimeno 2014). For instance, Boston and Bullock's (2010) most recent work on the unity-distinctiveness dilemma built upon the extensive coalition research on conventional control mechanisms used in coalition government to maintain cabinet unity. Boston and Bullock illustrated some of the innovative ways that coalition governments in New Zealand have addressed this problem by incorporating 'agree to disagree' clauses in coalition agreements and enabling 'hybrid arrangements' for minority parties to participate within the cabinet without being held to collective cabinet responsibility (Boston and Bullock, 2010:349).

Scholars have found that such arrangements are effective in overcoming the unity-distinctiveness dilemma and are able to accommodate the various political pressures of coalition government (Boston and Bullock 2010). Crucially, scholars have also found that such arrangements are integral to mitigating intra-coalition fighting that typically leads to 'the loss of political credibility (and hence votes) and an increased difficulty in realizing a coalition's collective purpose (Boston and Bullock, 2010:366).

Other scholars have also sought to explore the unity- distinctiveness issue in relation to the ministerial portfolio allocation within coalitions. Libby McEnhill's most recent work (2015) highlighted the impact of ministerial portfolio allocation on smaller coalition party's electoral viability and overall distinctiveness. McEnhill's analysis found that a smaller party's total control over one or two government departments is more advantageous than a wide spread of ministers across a number of departments in the long term, with respect to ensuring the carving out of a distinctive governing legacy (McEnhill, 2015:1). McEnhill also found that by doing so, such a party can simultaneously distance itself from other less successful policies outside of their policy remit.

However, recent research by David Fortunato (2015), suggests that junior coalition parties still face an uphill struggle in crafting a distinctive profile from their coalition partners. From a comparative analysis of voters across Europe, Fortunato found that junior coalition partner's ideology was often conflated with their senior partner's, building upon his existing research (2013) that showed 'voters associate coalition partners' issue positions as more similar than implied by their policy declarations alone' (Fortunato, 2013:1). Therefore, this again illustrates the difficulty coalition partner's encounter in presenting a distinct electoral offering, and highlights the important need for an effective communications strategy to counter these widely held assumptions. Fortunato's work also highlights the greater need for the junior coalition partner to differentiate more greatly than the senior.

2.3 Political Communication in Coalitions

Still, a number of articles in recent years have tried to consider the role that political communication can play for parties trying to manage the challenge that the unity-distinctiveness dilemma poses. This is a particularly relevant area of research, as little in the coalition literature has covered how parties respond to the internal (intra-party) and external (public opinion) pressures that coalition governance elicits, which are widely reported on and made public in the press. Some scholars more recently have tried to unpack this issue and explore how parties may use political communication in different ways to differentiate their party's values or policies while at the same time maintain unity within the coalition.

Lanny Martin and Georg Vanberg's work (2008) addresses this issue and argues that one of the ways coalition parties can harness their political communication and communicate to voters and constituents that they have not 'strayed significantly from their electoral commitments or diluted their ideology is through legislative speeches' (Martin and Vanberg, 2008:1). Martin and Vanberg's work built upon existing research by American scholars that 'floor speeches provide politicians and parties an important avenue for communicating with their constituents' (Mayhew 1974 cited in Martin and Vanberg 2008:502). In Martin and Vanberg's analysis they found that, in support of previous literature surrounding floor speeches, legislative debates are harnessed by coalition parties and are used as a forum 'to inform supporters about the different policy positions a party endorses and to justify compromises they may have supported' (Martin and Vanberg, 2008:513). Martin and Vanberg also found that legislative speeches were frequently used as an opportunity to 'persuade constituents that the party had bargained effectively on their behalf' (Martin and Vanberg, 2008:513). Ultimately, Martin and Vanberg's analysis suggested that the behaviour of coalition parties in legislative debates was largely driven by the internal dynamics of coalition governance (2008:513).

However, more recent work by Kluver and Sagarzazu (2012) has criticized this approach and argued that legislative debates are an imperfect form of data due to the fact that 'political parties can only give speeches on policy issues that have been scheduled on the parliamentary agenda and thus are constrained' (Kluver and

Sagarzazu 2012: 4). Thus, in a quantitative study, Kluver and Sagarzazu also analysed the political communication strategies of parties in coalition governments, and sought to analyse their differentiation strategy during coalitions. Unlike Martin and Vanberg, Kluver and Sagarzazu undertook a quantitatively text analysis of *press releases* of coalition parties in Germany from 2000-2010, with specific focus on the policy issues they covered.

Kluver and Sagarzazu argued that 'press releases constituted an ideal data source' to analyse what coalition parties communicate to their voters as 'political parties can independently choose what to communicate to their voters on a daily basis without being constrained by the legislative schedule or their coalition partner' (2012:4). In their analysis, Kluver and Sagarzazu argued that in the case of Germany coalition parties issue attention changes over the course of the electoral cycle, with 'differentiating issues prevailing at the beginning and end of the legislative term and compromise and unity dominating the middle of the term' (Kluver and Sagarzazu, 2012:23).

Kluver and Sagarzazu posit that the beginning of the term 'is characterized by differentiation between coalition parties as they emphasize their own policy profiles to signal fulfillment of election promises to voters' (2012:9), however 'after the initial period of focusing on different issues which might have caused problems and conflicts within the cabinet, coalition parties settle on a common issue agenda to effectively govern together and ensure the stability of the government' (2012:9). On this basis they argue that, 'coalition parties avoid disagreement in order to strengthen and maintain the coalition to secure the political offices they control. The survival of the government is a precondition for maintaining their political offices and office-seeking coalition parties therefore have strong incentives to avoid any activities that risk the break of the government' *(*Kluver and Sagarzazu 2012:9) Ultimately Kluver and Sagarzazu argue that the electoral cycle determines when and whether coalition parties appear to unite with or actively differentiate from their coalition partners (2012:5).

In light of the absence of further research in this field, this study seeks to examine this theory by analysing the political communication strategy of a junior coalition partner in a coalition government, within the data sets of press releases and party conference speeches.

2.4 Research Question and Expectations

As has been previously stated, the question this study seeks to answer, within the parameters of the data available is:

To what extent did the electoral cycle determine the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats?

It is the expectation of this study that in the case of the Liberal Democrats the electoral cycle will have less of a significant impact on the Liberal Democrats' political communication strategy.

It is also expected that factors outwith the electoral cycle will have more influence on the Liberal Democrats political communication strategy.

3.1 Research Design:

To answer the research question, this study will employ the use of content analysis, to analyse the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats in the coalition government.

The application of content analysis can be considered suitable for this study for a number of reasons. Content analysis is a method commonly employed by political communication scholars and has 'been used widely to describe the content of political communication messages' (Benoit, 2007:277). Content analysis provides political communication scholars with an 'effective way of quantifying dimensions of the content of political messages in texts' (Benoit, 2007:276). It allows scholars to process large amounts of text and systematically condense them to easier computable quantities, that then allow them to be analysed and inferences drawn. Furthermore, as Richard Perloff notes, content analysis is also adaptable to a number of different datasets; 'it can tell us if news covers certain candidates more favorably than others, whether female politicians receive different types of news coverage than male politicians, and how candidates use their websites to promote their campaigns' (Perloff, 2014:66). Furthermore, as in this case, content analysis can be used across different datasets such as press releases and party conference speeches with a developed coding book, increasing the reliability and consistency of the data.

The data used for this study was firstly press releases from the Liberal Democrats website archive from 2010-2015, and secondly keynote Party Conference speeches from 2010-2014. The press releases were coded for the issues they focused on from the beginning of the coalition until the end, on a day-to-day basis according to the UK Policy Agendas Project codebook (see appendix A for further information of the UK Policy Agendas Project codebook). The press releases were additionally examined for their sentiment, to discern whether the content of the press releases (where applicable) actively aligned the Liberal Democrats with their coalition partner's, or whether the content of the press releases sought to differentiate the Liberal Democrats from their coalition partner's, and how this may have changed over time. A codebook was authored that detailed what constituted 'differentiation' and what constituted 'alignment' (see appendix B). The same process was applied to

each party conference speech, wherein the author recorded and summarized the overall sentiment of the speeches.

There are several benefits to using these sets of data. Firstly, press releases provide a wealth of data from which to study the political communication strategy of a party. Press releases are a form of centrally controlled party communication crafted for a specific purpose, as such they provide a unique insight into a party's official communication strategy during government and in the run up to elections. They are primarily 'used to get a party's key message out to the public' either directly or through the media (Russman, 2012:2). Furthermore, press releases provide a rich data source due to their wide ranging focus, from the presentation of the party's policies, to statements on current issues, announcements of upcoming events, criticism of opposing parties and provide responses to political attacks in more detail than a poster or an advert might offer (Russman, 2012:3). Thus, as a data source they are far more encompassing than other datasets available, such as election posters or political adverts. Similarly, unlike speeches made by party leaders throughout the year, press releases are a consistent form of communication that 'more closely reflect the daily campaign (Russman, 2012:3), and thus provide a consistent dataset to comparatively analyse over a number of years. Additionally, unlike legislative speeches, press releases are 'unconstrained by the parliamentary agenda and as such parties can decide independently which issues they want to talk about' (Kluver and Sagarzazu, 2012:5). Lastly, press releases were also used due to the availability of the data, that included the entire Liberal Democrat press release collection from 2010-2015, that enabled the author to compare the attention of press releases throughout the beginning middle and end of the coalition.

Likewise, party conference speeches are also useful data sources. They often set the tone for the forthcoming year and as such are indicative of future policy, strategy and overall focus of a political party. In this regard, party conference speeches are considered to be great subjects of research as they can be considered to be signifiers. Robin Pettit argues that party conferences are significant due to their 'extensive media exposure', their 'high formal importance' and their unifying function (Pettit, 2013:2). It is widely held, that party conferences have shifted from being functional events that serve to approve new policies, and are now 'increasingly

being used by party managers to project their leaders, propound policy and attack the opposition', and are considered to be a 'part of the permanent election campaign' (Kavanagh, 1996: 28). In addition, the occasion of a party conference affords a key opportunity for political parties to send direct messages to their members, supporters and the wider public, with little constraint from their coalition to muzzle their messages. In this respect, the party conferences are a crucial opportunity to explore how the Liberal Democrats sought to convey their role in the coalition and more importantly how they wished the public to regard their role. The analysis of party conference speeches throughout the coalition is to discern the sentiment of the Liberal Democrats and whether they seek to differentiate or align themselves with their coalition partners and the coalition's policies.

The political communication strategy will be measured in two respects. Firstly, the political communication strategy will be measured according to issue coverage in press releases. It can be said that the policies a party initiates correspond with the values, beliefs and ideology of that political party. Therefore, the issues given greater attention and policy initiatives produced by parties are generally reflective of those values and beliefs held by that political party. Secondly, the issues and policies a party chooses to talk about, often reflect their manifesto commitments, unless they are responding to recent events. As such, issues can be perceived to be the clear and primary indicators that act as differentiators between parties. Thus, the amount of attention given to a particular issue or policy can be considered to be reflective of the overall political communication strategy.

However, it must be said, issues alone are an imperfect basis on which to measure a political communication strategy. Whilst the issues that party's talk about the most can be good indicators of efforts to differentiate, issues are also fluid and can change in there importance over time. This study therefore, seeks to account for more overt signals of changes in the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats, particularly looking at the sentiment within the press releases and party conference speeches. Therefore, this study extends the framework used by Kluver and Sagarzazu and additionally analyses the sentiment of the press releases and thereby seeks to elucidate any overt changes in the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats. As has been outlined, the content of the press releases and party

conference speeches were also analysed for any overt alignment with the Conservatives or differentiation from the Conservatives, according to a codebook developed by the author defining what this consists of (see appendix B). This supplementary analysis makes this study unique in its approach and goes beyond the limited research on this topic.

3.2 The Data:

The data used for this study includes all press releases available in the Liberal Democrats' online archives from May 2010 to May 2015(It is possible this is not the entire universe of press releases for this time period due to archiving errors). Press releases that were tangential to this study were also excluded. This included press releases on factual notifications, promotional content, non-policy editorials, and duplicates.

Limitations to the data:

The press releases used for this study are drawn from two online public archives on the Liberal Democrats website:

1. http://www.libdems.org.uk/press_office
2. http://www.libdems.org.uk/news

As such, this study cannot control for any editorial errors that may have occurred in the uploading and displaying of the press releases issued throughout the period being studied. The possibility of missing, or unaccounted for press releases is likely. As such, the author is aware that this poses marginal limitations for how representative the data is and what conclusions can be drawn from the press releases available.

3.3 The Method in practice:

Both the press releases and party conference speeches were subject to content analysis. In total 800 press releases were analysed and 5 party conference speeches from September 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. Each press release was coded for the issue or policy it covered according to the Policy Agenda Project Codebook.

Those press releases that did not fall under a main category (ie. Health, Energy), or a sub category (ie. mental health, nuclear energy) according to the policy agenda project codebook were noted as 'other' and the title, and content was noted down. Additionally, each press release was also coded for any sentiment that 'differentiated' or 'aligned' the Liberal Democrats with the coalition- as defined in the author's codebook (see Appendix B).

Each press release's title and date was recorded. In addition, each press release was given an issue/ policy code according to those established by the Policy Agenda Project. For instance, 'Energy' as a main category had the coding number 800, whereas Nuclear Energy, a sub category, had the coding number 805. Thus each press release that focused on nuclear energy was recorded as the policy code 805. When analyzing the sentiment of differentiation or alignment, each press release was separately coded for differentiation, alignment or neither (referred to as neutral). Each press release was given a coding value of '1' for the presence of alignment sentiment in the press release or a '1' for the presence of differentiation sentiment according to the conditions outlined in the codebook. Each press release was given a 0 if neither were overtly present.

The same process was applied to the party conference speeches from 2010-2014 that were critically reviewed and again were coded for sentiment for any instances of alignment or differentiation from their coalition partners. Each statement or passage that either overtly aligned or differentiated was recorded and a total percentage of the speech that either aligned or differentiated was calculated. In addition statements that explicitly conveyed sentiment (whether alignment or differentiation) were also recorded for later reference and referred to in the analysis. This process was applied to all the autumn party conference speeches from 2010-2014.

The press release data and party conference data was then collated and analysed on a year-by-year basis. The press release data was also analysed by issue coverage from 2010-2015 on an issue basis, and by a year-to-year basis. The press release data was also analysed by the first 18 months of government and the last 18

months of government for comparative research. Each issue was analysed year-by-year and contrasted with sentiment analysis to seek out trends.

Section 4.1 Findings and Analysis

Table 2: % Issue attention per year of Press Releases

Issue Policy	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total*
1. Macroeconomics	9.6%	6.4%	12.9%	20.7%	15.4%	24.1%	14.5%
10. Transportation	1.5%	2.1%	8.1%	1.7%	2.2%	3.6%	2.8%
12. Law, Crime and Family issues	4.4%	7.9%	4.8%	10.3%	5.2%	1.5%	5.3%
13. Social Welfare	5.1%	5.7%	0.0%	10.3%	5.6%	3.6%	5.1%
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing issues	4.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	5.8%	3.0%
15. Banking, Finance and Domestic Commerce	3.7%	6.4%	14.5%	5.2%	4.9%	3.6%	5.5%
16. Defence	3.7%	3.6%	0.0%	5.2%	0.4%	1.5%	2.0%
17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications.	2.9%	10.0%	8.1%	0.0%	3.0%	0.7%	4.0%
19 International Affairs and Foreign Aid	5.9%	3.6%	6.5%	6.9%	7.5%	0.7%	5.3%
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues (Immigration) and Civil Liberties	5.9%	5.7%	6.5%	3.4%	8.2%	7.3%	6.8%
20. Government Operations	14.7%	10.7%	17.7%	3.4%	1.9%	1.5%	6.9%
21. Public Lands, Colonial and Territorial Issues	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
3. Health	8.1%	7.9%	0.0%	1.7%	9.4%	15.3%	8.6%
4. Agriculture	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	1.5%	0.4%
5. Labour and Employment	1.5%	2.9%	4.8%	1.7%	8.2%	5.1%	4.9%
6. Education	8.1%	10.7%	6.5%	10.3%	5.2%	8.8%	7.8%
7. Environment	5.9%	4.3%	3.2%	5.2%	4.9%	4.4%	4.8%
8. Energy	2.9%	1.4%	0.0%	6.9%	7.9%	2.9%	4.4%
99. Other	11.0%	10.7%	6.5%	6.9%	6.0%	8.0%	8.1%
Grand Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

* 'Total' denotes the percentage totals for the entire period issue/policy attention from 2010-2015

Table 3: % of Differentiation/ Alignment sentiment in Press Releases by year

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
% Differentiated	17.64%	25%	37.17%	46.55%	58.13%	82.64%
% Aligned	15.46%	31%	19.35%	13.79%	8.13%	2.19%
Total # of Press Releases	136	140	62	58	267	137

Table 4: % Differentiation/ Alignment sentiment in Liberal Democrat Party
Conference Speeches 2010-2014

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
% Differentiated	17.1%	22.85%	23.4%	28.2%	38.13%
% Aligned	12.8%	5.2%	6.3%	1.7%	0.8%
Total # Speeches	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

4.2 Sentiment of Press Releases

In order to gain an understanding of the differentiation/alignment strategy of the Liberal Democrats during the coalition, Table 3 depicts the coded sentiment of the press releases during each year of the coalition. Table 3 shows the percentage of press releases that differentiated/ aligned the Liberal Democrats from/ with the Conservatives during each year of the coalition. The percentages show how many of the total number of press releases that year, differentiated/aligned the Liberal Democrats from/with the Conservatives during the course of the coalition.

As Table 3 shows, the sentiment of the press releases changed substantially over the course of the coalition. In the first 8 months of the coalition in the year 2010, the Liberal Democrats differentiated marginally more than they aligned with the Conservatives. In 2010, approximately 18% of the press releases differentiated the Liberal Democrats from their newly formed coalition partners, slightly lower than expected. Whereas, approximately 15% of the press releases overtly aligned the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives. The remaining percentage of press releases remained neutral or took no overt stance in their content. These figures suggest that the Liberal Democrats were trying to strike a balance between emphasizing their role in government and their own policies, whilst also remaining united in the coalition with the Conservatives. This result deviates somewhat from Kluver and Sagarzazu's pattern.

Comparably, in the following year the Liberal Democrats' press releases aligned them with their Conservative coalition partners more than they differentiated from them. In 2011, 31% of the Liberal Democrats press releases actively aligned themselves with the Conservatives in the coalition government, whereas, 25% of the

press releases actively differentiated the Liberal Democrats. Thus in the first 18 months there was an increased shift towards aligning (unifying) with the Conservatives, which is expected for this period.

In 2012 however, as the coalition approached its middle phase, nearly 40% of all press releases put out by the Liberal Democrats that year sought to differentiate or emphasise the singular profile of the party, whilst less than 20% of all press releases aligned the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives. This signaled a substantial departure from the strategy of the previous year, suggesting an escalation in differentiation.

As table 3 shows, 2013 followed this similar trend. The amount of press releases that aligned the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives declined from 2012 to 2013 to 13.79 %. Comparatively, the number of press releases differentiating the Liberal Democrats from their coalition partners rose considerably to 46.55%, accounting for nearly half of all the press releases put out that year. This change in strategy considerably deviates from Kluver and Sagarzazu's assertions.

2014 tells a similar story as the electoral campaign unofficially begins. The level of press releases differentiating the Liberal Democrats from their coalition partners again increases to 58.13%, whilst there is a significant decline in the number of press releases aligning with the Conservatives, just 8.13% for that year. Thus by 2014 the majority of the output in the Liberal Democrats press releases, was either highly critical of their coalition partners, or sought to emphasise their own distinct identity, as the differentiation strategy became increasingly defined.

As table 3 shows, by 2015 the level of differentiation within the press releases becomes particularly acute. The Liberal Democrats sought to differentiate or emphasise their own profile in 82.64% of the press releases put out in the last 5 months of the coalition, whereas they aligned in a mere 2.19% of press releases. Thus, in the last five months in the run up to the election, the press releases were predominantly utilized to emphasise and differentiation the Liberal Democrats from their coalition partner.

In all, the results analysing the sentiment in the press releases throughout the coalition differ from expectations. Interestingly, the results suggest that as the coalition endured, the Liberal Democrats increasingly sought to differentiate themselves from their coalition partners. Whilst the early period from 2010-2011 can be identified as a period of relative alignment and unity, by the middle phase of 2012, the data shows the sentiment of their press releases had increasingly tipped towards highlighting the differences between the Liberal Democrats and their coalition partner's and emphasising the distinct profile of the Liberal Democrats, rather than aligning them. This suggests a marked shift in the strategy of the Liberal Democrats.

The data also suggests that the press releases were increasingly politicised and used for campaign purposes as the coalition endured. Whilst in 2010 only 33% of press releases either aligned or differentiated the Liberal Democrats, by 2014 over 66% are utilized for this purpose, and by 2015, 84% were used for this purpose.

4.3 Issue Attention of Press Releases

In order to discern the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats' during the coalition, table 2 charts the varying issue attention of the Liberal Democrats' press releases during each year of the coalition. Table 2 illustrates on the horizontal the comparative attention on each individual issue during the course of the coalition, and on the vertical the issue attention according to each year. Table 2 also shows the total issue/policy attention of the press releases across the 5 years in the last column.

As table 2 shows, issue attention in the press releases differed considerably over the course of the coalition, with the press releases touching on a wide number of issues. As has been previously stated, the Liberal Democrats campaigned the 2010 election on four key issues, namely: fairer taxes, more chances for children from poorer backgrounds, a fairer and greener economy and cleaning up politics through political and electoral reform (BBC 14/04/10). Their flagship policies were a rise in the lowest band of income tax threshold, a pupil premium fund for children from poorer backgrounds including free school meals, an economy funded by green jobs, and political reform including a referendum for a more proportional electoral system

(BBC 14/04/10). As table 2 shows, some of these issues featured more prominently than others throughout the coalition, and some remained more consistent issues than others.

Overall, the Liberal Democrats issued the highest number of press releases on the macro economy, with particular focus on taxation and the national debt with this issue peaking in the last five months of the election campaign and accounting for nearly 25% of all press releases of this period. The Liberal Democrats also spoke most consistently about 'green issues' with the combined energy and environment issues accounting for a significant portion of their press releases throughout the coalition, particularly peaking at the beginning and end of the coalition, in line with expectations. Surprisingly, health, as an issue gained a considerable amount of attention in their press releases, notably in the first 18 months and last 18 months of the coalition. To a lesser degree, government operations, concerning political and electoral reform, featured prominently in the first two years of the coalition, but as the data shows, it diminished in importance by 2013.

In the first 8 months of the coalition, the Liberal Democrats' issue attention in their press releases carefully balanced between emphasizing their own issues and promoting coalition policies. As table 2 shows, the largest proportion of the Liberal Democrats' press releases focused on the category government operations, and specifically two sub categories concerning constitutional and electoral reform. These issues encompassed one of their key election pledges of political reform- part of their promise to clean up politics (press release 16/11/10 '*Nick Clegg sets out vision for political reform*'). These issues accounted for approximately 15% of the press releases issued that year and exceeded the amount of issues concerning the coalition as a whole. Still, secondary to these issues was the matter of the economy, shown by the high level of press releases concerning macroeconomics. Approximately 10% of the press releases that year concentrated on this issue, with particular focus on the public deficit and the proposed Conservative spending cuts of which the Liberal Democrats publicly supported and justified (Press release 20/10/10 '*Featherstone: Fairness at the centre of decisions on cuts and spending*'). The high percentage of press releases issued by the Liberal Democrats on the economy is interesting in the

early stages of the coalition, as this issue is typically perceived to be a strength of the Conservatives (Ipsos Mori Poll 2000-2014).

However, the Liberal Democrats also emphasized their commitment to climate change and a green economy, a key policy differentiator from the Conservatives, with energy and the environment accounting for 8.8% of press releases that year (Press Release 21/09/10 *'Chris Huhne: Green Deal will be a revolution'*). Similarly, the Liberal Democrats also focused on the issue of education, seeking to emphasize their fulfillment of election promises (Press release 20/10/10 *'Teather: We're delivering on our promise to give every child a fair start'*). In all, the results suggests an attempt by the Liberal Democrats to differentiate on their key issues such as political reform and a green economy, whilst remaining unified with the Conservatives on issues concerning the economy such as cuts to welfare and public spending (Press Release 20/10/10 *Hughes: Necessary reductions in public spending are as fair as possible*).

In the following year, 2011, the Liberal Democrats' maintained their alignment with the Conservatives on a number of issues, publicly aligning with the Conservatives on the issue of the economy and issuing press releases justifying and supporting cuts to the welfare package, and the reforming of the banking and financial sectors (Press Release 19/12/11 *Stephen Williams: Coalition has acted swiftly and decisively to regulate the banks*). Still a number of press releases continued to focus on government operations accounting for 10.7% and education also accounting for 10.7%, that specifically focused on widening access to higher education institutions for children from poorer backgrounds, emphasizing their socially democratic values. The consistent percentage of press releases devoted to issues concerning government operations continuing from the previous year, can be partially explained by the Liberal Democrat-sponsored referendum that proposed changing the electoral system to the more proportional AV voting system, that was due to take place that May (Press release 12/03/11 *'Farron proud to lead the Liberal Democrat Yes to Fairer Votes campaign'*). This year also had a high number of press releases concerning technology and communications accounting for 17.7%, that is best be explained as a response to the high level of exposure the phone hacking scandal attracted in the press and amount of attention paid to it by politicians.

However, during the mid-phase of the coalition the issues the press releases focused on suggest an increasing attempt to differentiate from their coalition partners in terms of their policies. In 2012 the Liberal Democrats' press releases predominantly focused on government operations and economic issues. The attention paid to government operations, specifically the sub category 'local government' focused on increased 'localism', an issue that the Liberal Democrats had promoted as one of their key policies of 'devolving power to local communities' (Guardian 19/05/10). This focus also increased in the context of the local government elections that occurred in May of that year. In 2012, 88% of the press releases that year coded for macroeconomics were on issues relating to taxation. The issue of tax increasingly became a policy the Liberal Democrats sought to differentiate themselves on, having criticised the Conservatives for their failure to address multinational tax avoidance, and criticizing their tax break for married couples in a number of press releases (Press Release 18/02/12 *Stephen Williams: Why should people who are not married pay more tax?*'). This increased level of differentiation is surprising at this point of the coalition, and subverts Kluver and Sagarzazu's assertions that this period is typically characterized by unity and co-operation.

The year 2013 follows a similar trend. 20% of all press releases put out concerned macroeconomics, with a continued focus on the confronting issue of taxation, as well as a number of press releases emphasizing the individual rather than joint role the Liberal Democrats played in bringing about the economic recovery (Press Release 25/10/13 *Liberal Democrats in Government driving economic recovery*). This was to be a reoccurring theme in the latter stage of the coalition. In addition to this, the year saw an increased focus on green issues with press releases on energy and environment focusing on the reduction of carbon emissions and the Liberal Democrats pledging to create more green jobs, amounting to 12.1% of that year's press releases (Press Release 19/12/2013 *Lib Dems to create 200,000 green jobs*'). Furthermore, education featured prominently, accounting for 10.3% of that year's press releases. The increased focus on education sought to highlight the Liberal Democrats key promise to help underprivileged children in schools, via their pupil premium policy. The data suggests that this was an attempt to increasingly define the differentiation strategy and highlight the individual profile of the Liberal Democrats.

This differentiation strategy became more acute during the last 18 months of the coalition, where the data suggests there was a substantial shift in the focus of the press releases as the general election approached. As table 2 shows there was a significant focus on the economy with 15% of that year's press releases devoted to issues of taxation, high levels of employment and the reduced deficit. Similarly, energy and the environment accounted for 12.9% of all press releases that year, with considerable critical focus on Conservative plans to oppose onshore renewable wind farms (Press Release 24/04/14 'Tory plans to stop onshore wind shows their true colours'). There was also an increased focus on health, with the Liberal Democrats promoting the specific issue of mental health (Press release 25/11/14 'Nick Clegg announces mental health taskforce'), and differentiating from the Conservatives on NHS reform and funding.

As table 2 shows, during the last five months prior to the election there was an intensification in the focus on the economy, with 25% of all press releases issued by the Liberal Democrats that year concerning the economy. The issue of the economy was used as a particular differentiator in the last five months as the Liberal Democrats frequently accused the Conservatives of planning and concealing further cuts to public spending, that they claimed would risk the financial stability brought in by the Liberal Democrats (Press Release 27/04/15 'The Tories won't keep the economy on the right track' and 19/04/15 'The Tories are not being honest about the scale of their planned cuts'). Furthermore, there was a substantial increase in the focus on health, which accounted for 15% of all press releases that year. The issue of health became a particular point on which the Liberal Democrats sought to differentiate from their coalition partner's, by promising to protect NHS funding and increase funding for mental health (press release 06/01/15 'Liberal Democrats to increase NHS funding by £8bn by 2020'). A similar increase in the number of press releases on education, which constituted 8.8% of that year, and followed a similar pattern of accusing their coalition partners of planning to cut the education budget (Press release 03/02/15 'The Conservatives would cut funding for nurseries, colleges and the Pupil Premium').

In summary, the Liberal Democrats' issue attention focused initially on core governing issues, like the economy where they publicly aligned with the Conservatives. The initial stages of the coalition also focused on key differentiating

issues including their pre-election pledges, like electoral and political reform and the green economy. In the middle phase of the election, they turned their attention to themes of the environment, energy and education, and most particularly economic issues such as taxation whilst also seeking credit for the economic recover as they began to diverge and distance themselves from their coalition partners. As the 2015 election approached and both parties' prioritized their own electoral campaigns, the economy, healthcare and education were the most frequently covered issues.

4.4 Sentiment of Party Conference Speeches

In order to gain an understanding of the differentiation/ alignment strategy of the Liberal Democrats during the coalition Table 4 depicts the coded sentiment of the autumn party conference speeches during the coalition 2010-2014. Table 4 shows the overall percentage of the speech that differentiated/ aligned the Liberal Democrats from/ with the Conservatives in each year of the coalition, according to the codebook. The percentages show how much of the to. Thus, the following section will present findings from the sentiment analysis of the party conference speeches given by Nick Clegg between 2010 and 2014, including brief examples from the speeches to illustrate points.

As table 4 shows, Nick Clegg's 2010 party conference speech marginally differentiated the distinct profile of the Liberal Democrats, more than it aligned the party with the Conservatives. The speech pointed towards what the party was already doing and how it had already achieved some of its electoral promises: 'we promised no tax on the first £10,000 you earn. We've already raised the personal allowance by £1,000' and 'we promised more investment in the children who need the most help at school. It will happen at the start of the next school year.' Furthermore, underpinning the speech was a message of reassurance put out to Liberal Democrat members and supporters that the party had not abandoned their values, emphasizing the real presence of a liberal agenda in government and outlined the liberal-centric policies that were forthcoming in the coalition. However, on a number of occasions, the Liberal Democrats distinctly aligned themselves with the Conservatives, amounting to 11% of the speech. They praised the coalition agreement stating 'it is our shared agenda. And I stand by it. I believe in it. I believe it will change Britain for good'.

Similarly, Clegg praised Cameron for his bipartisanship, 'David Cameron showed he could think beyond his party and help build a new kind of politics'. All in all, Clegg's inaugural party conference speech in government, aligned the Liberal Democrats with their coalition partners, but also differentiated them somewhat more. In this sense, the speech endorses Kluver and Sagarzazu's argument that the beginning period of coalitions is characterized initially by differentiation before a longer period of alignment. However, as the figures denote, Clegg's differentiation was offset somewhat, by comparable but slighter lesser level of alignment sentiment.

Comparably, the sentiment and tone of the 2011 speech differed slightly. As table 4 shows, interestingly, differentiation prevailed in the 2011 conference speech, though it must be noted, less in the form of outright criticisms of the Conservatives and more in the form of emphasising the Liberal Democrats; own profile. Contrasting with the results of the press releases, this speech notably lacked high levels of alignment that would be expected at this stage of the coalition, with statements aligning the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives comprising of 6% of the speech. Furthermore, unlike the previous year, far more attention was focused on the Liberal Democrats as a party like their values etc., than discussing their coalition partner. In line with this strategy, Clegg also made a point of highlighting a number of policies the Liberal Democrats had fought the Conservatives on, such as the NHS reforms, stressing how he had been 'fighting to keep the NHS safe. Fighting to protect human rights. Fighting to create jobs. Fighting for every family. Not doing the easy thing, but doing the right thing'. As such, the general tone went further to enhance the LD party identity and present examples of differentiation on relevant issues. This heightened level of differentiation is unusual for this period of the coalition. However, it may be more indicative of the changing feeling of the party toward their coalition partner's as the year progressed, due to the conference taking place toward the end of the year in autumn.

In 2012, as table 4 shows, the same levels of differentiation and alignment sentiment persisted, varying only slightly, in the case of alignment. The speech predominantly focused on the difficult realities of government, conveying the message to Liberal Democrat supporters to stand firm and see it through, emphasising that the process of government is slow and enacting policies takes time. Significantly,

Nick Clegg uses the party conference as an opportunity to explain and justify past policy decisions that were perceived to be contrary to his party's values, namely cutting the top rate of tax for the highest earners. Clegg notes 'I conceded… But I stand by the package as a whole. Why? Because as liberals, we want to see the tax on work reduced'. This communication strategy has similarities with those outlined by Martin and Vanberg with reference to German parties using legislative speeches to justify unpalatable compromises (2008:504). Similarly, Clegg openly asserts that the Liberal Democrats will not diverge from their beliefs for the sake of unity, 'we will not tether ourselves to detailed spending plans with the Conservatives through the next Parliament'. This defiant tone, again, is unexpected during this mid point of the coalition that as has been said, is typically characterised by unity, and accord. However, as with the previous year, the strategy of differentiation was far more characterised by the emphasis on the Liberal Democrats' *own profile*, rather than being highly critical of their coalition partner, or its attitudes.

In 2013, the number of statements differentiating the Liberal Democrats from their coalition partners distinctly increased to nearly 30%, meanwhile statements aligning the party with the Conservatives declined. This suggests an escalation in their differentiation strategy from the previous year. The speech itself asserted that the Liberal Democrats were now a 'party of government' entrenching their capability as a governing party, and like previous years, there was an increasing number of statements highlighting Liberal Democrat policy triumphs in government, 'we stopped ID cards. We've taken innocent people off the DNA database. We've ended child detention in the immigration system, approved equal marriage, we've cut income tax bills by £700 and taken almost three million people on low pay out of paying any income tax altogether'. These comments therein reinforce the idea of the Liberal Democrats distinct and singular influence in government.

What is also noticeable in the speech itself (though not clearly conveyed by the figures but inferred from the author's analysis) is the shift to a more aggressive differentiation strategy in 2013. Where previously the Liberal Democrats had often highlighted differences in approach or opinion with the Conservatives, this speech contained far more personal attacks and highly differentiating sentiment. For instance, in a part of the speech that received notable attention in the press, the Liberal

Democrats scorned the Conservatives for claiming credit for changes in the taxation of low earners, and listed 16 controversial Conservative policies that they had blocked throughout the coalition. Thus, the Liberal Democrats used the speech to convey how they had 'thwarted the Conservatives in government' (Guardian 18/09/13) and acted as a restraint to more extreme Conservative policies. This acute differentiation, echoes the increasing level of differentiation in the press releases at this point in time, and again defies the 'unity' strategy communication that typically prevails at this point of a coalition.

In the last September party conference speech before the election, as table 4 shows, the level of differentiation outstripped the level of alignment considerably, with less than a handful of statements moderately aligning the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives at just 0.8%. Comparatively, the sentiment of the statements in the speech overridingly tried to differentiate the Liberal Democrats from their coalition partners. The level of differentiation is significantly higher than the previous year, suggesting a further escalation in their differentiation strategy, with nearly 40% of the content devoted to this objective. Interestingly, the Liberal Democrats pursued the strategy of both criticizing the Conservatives individually for a litany of policies they had blocked in government such as the mansion tax, whilst also clubbing them together with Labour- claiming they represented the 'old political class'. In the speech, Clegg calls their coalition partner, 'self interested' accusing them of snobbery, and attacking their record on education. Furthermore, Clegg again differentiates on policies and shining a spotlight on the individual triumphs the Liberal Democrats made in government. In this regard and as the data shows, it is fair to day that the level of differentiation by this period was so acute that their strategy was now more about actively distancing themselves from Conservatives, and showing no greater allegiance to their coalition partners than their opposition in government.

5.1 Discussion

To recap, this study sought to answer the central research question: *To what extent did the electoral cycle determine the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats during the coalition?*

The results of the analysis suggest that the Liberal Democrats' political communication strategy only partially followed the pattern outlined by Kluver and Sagarzazu, particularly in terms of the sentiment of their press releases, however much less so in terms of their party conference speeches. As the data for the press releases shows, the first 8 months of the coalition was characterized by the Liberal Democrats initially differentiating and emphasizing their distinct electoral pledges but still ultimately aligning themselves in the coalition. Notably however, levels of differentiation in the first period were lower than anticipated. Alignment with the Conservatives markedly peaked in 2011 and overtook levels of differentiation considerably. However, by the autumn of 2011 the party conference speech signaled a breakdown in unity. By 2012 the data shows, that by the middle phase of the coalition the Liberal Democrats had begun to activate their differentiation strategy as the sentiment of the press releases became increasingly hostile, and the Liberal Democrats diverged from the strategy outlined by Kluver and Sagarzazu. This differentiation increased year on year, and climaxed by 2015, where the sentiment was noticeably acrimonious. The results from the party conferences broadly correspond with this analysis, however perhaps indicate a souring in the relationship towards the autumn of 2011.

In all, these findings do not uphold Kluver and Sagarzazu's argument that the middle phase of coalitions tend to follow a trend of pragmatic cooperation and alignment. They also suggest that in this case factor's outwith the electoral cycle determined the direction of the Liberal Democrats political communication strategy.

In terms of issue attention, the results were far less unequivocal. The issue attention the Liberal Democrats' press releases have been shown to be diffuse and varying. The data shows that the prominence and prevalence of differentiating issues fluctuated considerably over time, often inconsistently with the electoral cycle. For

instance certain topics such as civil liberties and minority issues such as equal pay, a key differentiator of the Liberal Democrats, hardly featured in the early stages of the coalition, but were then rolled out in 2014-2015. Likewise, socially democratic issues and policies only feature moderately throughout the 2014-15 election campaign, and pale into significance by comparison to the focus on the economy in the press releases. The results have also shown that typical differentiating issues were not the only issues the Liberal Democrats chose to differentiate on. For instance, the issue of the economy, an issue perceived to be a strength of the Conservatives (Ipsos Mori Poll 2010-2014), was dominantly focused on and prioritized by the Liberal Democrats at the beginning of the coalition and particularly as the 2015 general election nears, often ahead of their own differentiating issues.

This is also supported by the low level of press releases pitched at differentiating the Liberal Democrats in the initial stages of the coalition, with just 17% of all their press releases seeking to differentiate them from the Conservatives in 2010. Whilst the issues they primarily talked about broadly correspond as differentiating issues, notably political reform and their pupil premium education policy, the percentage of press releases seems unusually low for a period when it is expected that they should be differentiating substantially, when nearly 60% of their press releases remained neutral. This can be starkly compared to 2015 wherein nearly 82% of all press releases were utilized to differentiate the Liberal Democrats. This assessment and the evidence presented heretofore, goes some way in lending support to a number of commentators at the time, who asserted that 'maintaining a distinct profile from the Conservatives was perceived secondary to the initial concerns of running the government' and making it work (Mike Finn in Seldon eds., 2015: 496).

This lack of targeted differentiation on issues implies a party inexperienced in or not fully aware of the importance of communications in government. This observation is perhaps echoed in Liberal Democrat party president Tim Farron's comment during the 2011 party conference: *'clearly we have not succeeded in communicating our message, which has led to a loss of identity and ... support. It may have been naive of us not to realise the threat we faced as the smaller party in a coalition government' 09/09/11.* To contrast and put this in context, other British parties and particularly the Labour Party were renowned for their sophisticated

communications strategy that elevated the importance of communications to the forefront of government. Party strategists militarily focused on 'controlling the narrative' in the press (Gould 1998: 94.) and were most renowned for the focusing on 2-3 central issues and not diverting from this focus in their communications strategy (Gould 1998: 92).

Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats did differentiate on one specific issue the 'green economy' that remained consistent in their prominence in the press releases, with the combined percentage of press releases on energy and the environment notably peaking in the beginning and at the end of the coalition. Thus, the inconsistency in their issue attention may be more reflective of the Liberal Democrats attempt to address issues that they perceived were most important to the public, rather than consistently emphasise their key differentiating policies. Having said that, this incongruence in strategy, reflected in their political communication further suggests that the electoral cycle influenced the political communication strategy of the Liberal Democrats to a much lesser degree that Kluver and Sagarzazu purport.

It is clear that Kluver and Sagarzazu's work only partly applies to the Liberal Democrats experience in coalition. Evidently other factors, outwith the electoral cycle influenced the strategy of the Liberal Democrats political communication. In this case what can be surmised to have caused this change in direction is the plummeting popularity of the party shown best through polling data (Table 1) that can be seen to coincide with this shift in communication strategy. As Table 1 shows, by the end of 2011 into 2012, the Liberal Democrats polling figures had waned to 9%, the lowest since they entered into the coalition. It can be said that these declining polling figures would have put considerable internal pressure on the party to change their strategic course. Furthermore, at this time the identity of the Liberal Democrats was perceived to also be in crisis. Evidence from a poll in March 2012 from Populus for *The Times*, suggested that the Liberal Democrats reputation was being harmed by their coalition partners as 46% of those polled disagreed that the Liberal Democrats were 'a party for ordinary people, not just the best off'. A common perception held about their coalition partner's. This perception of their party completely contradicted their ideology of 'fairness' and socially democratic values they espoused. These factors alongside a number of substantial losses in local elections in 2011, and a considerable

defeat in a Liberal Democrat sponsored referendum would have placed multiple pressures on the party. As such, the decision to change strategic course, clearly resulted from the party determining that continuing to align with the Conservatives was going to be more costly to their party in the long term than breaking unity in the coalition.

5.2 Challenges to the study:

This study has raised a number of interesting points, however there are some limitations to the data that need to be discussed. It can be said that the established method of analysing the level of sentiment/alignment certainly goes some way in underscoring the changing nature of their communications as the coalition endured, however, as it is coded to a subjective code established by the author, the results may not reveal the whole picture. Relatedly, it must also be reminded that the coding undertaken is subjective, and as such should another researcher pursue the same task, results may differ. Thus, this presents certain limitations to the studies conclusions. Despite this, it is the view of the author that the findings across the two strands of data: party conferences and press releases are not idiosyncratic to this study. The results unequivocally show a non-adherence to the established pattern of coalition political communication outlined by Kluver and Sagarzazu. Thus, it is the view of the author that if a different code was developed that sought to answer the same question, whilst certain results may differ slightly (such as the exact percentages in issue attention), it is clear the fundamental conclusions would be unchanged. Furthermore, it must also be reminded that the results of this study and conclusions drawn derive solely from the press releases and party conference speeches, and thus cannot be said to be fully representative of the Liberal Democrats political communication strategy as a whole, but can be said to be indicative of it.

Conclusion:

The examination of the Liberal Democrats political communication strategy during the coalition has presented some interesting findings and equally confirmed some of the initial expectations outlined at the start of this study.

As has been shown, the Liberal Democrats political communication strategy significantly diverged from the established pattern outlined by Kluver and Sagarzazu (2012) regarding coalition parties' political communication strategies.

Thus, it can be said that the electoral cycle played a relatively inconsequential role, having little noticeable impact on their political communication strategy at the beginning of the coalition and only noticeably influencing their political communication strategy at the end of the term, which was not unexpected as the elections drew closer for a party seeking office.

The Liberal Democrats notably aligned with their coalition partners at the beginning of the coalition, however, following a series of electoral catastrophes and plummeting polling figures by 2012, the party rapidly initiated a differentiation strategy during the mid phase of the coalition (typically characterized as a period of alignment and unity) that climaxed in 2015 as the election approached.

Whilst the evidence shows that the Liberal Democrats political communication strategy significantly diverged from the expected pattern, the findings of this study do not go so far as to disprove or debunk the claims of Kluver and Sagarzazu's study, rather what they serve to exemplify is how their theory may be contingent on a number of factors. It can be said, that whilst parties may seek to pursue a disciplined political communication strategy that differentiates at the beginning and end of the coalition and strives to align in the middle, they may encounter competing necessities during government, thus causing their priorities to change. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, this clearly played a role, as the realities of governing and internal dynamics of coalition government caught up with them.

Furthermore, experience in government, particularly experience in coalitions, is a factor that should not be overlooked (in this case) and may have a considerable impact on how parties pursue their communication strategy in the context of a coalition. It may be assumed that a party with significant experience in coalition government would know how to tactfully tailor their political communication strategy according to the complicated dynamics of coalition governing, as seen by parties in Germany, whose political communication is so adapted to coalition government, that it targets both voters and potential coalition partners (Negrine, 2007:75). This well established tradition of coalition governance and experience is a factor that is assumed in Kluver and Sagarzazu's work, but as it has been shown this experience is not always present.

As it has been illustrated in the case of the Liberal Democrats, little in their political communication strategy seemed to dynamically address or confront the difficulties of governing in a coalition. Crucially, they failed to emphasise their differentiating policies consistently and at the right times, choosing to overwhelmingly emphasise the economy in their press releases before the 2015 election, over key Liberal Democrat policies, and choosing to align with the Conservatives on the economy at the beginning of the coalition. Though they may have emphasized certain distinct or differentiating policies over the period, the data shows that this was not pursued strongly or consistently.

With these conclusions in mind, it is clear the need for further research in this field is imperative. Having identified these trends in their political communication strategy, this work creates a solid platform for future research. Future endeavors might be worthwhile investigating and tracking the changing *narrative* of the Liberal Democrats in their political communication throughout the coalition, beyond the 'sentiment' identified here (that due to the confines of this study could not be fully explored). Furthermore, aspects touched upon herein regarding the party conference, echo Martin and Vanberg's work (2008) and show the Liberal Democrats using the party conference to justify and explain to their members and supporters, decisions they have made in government. This again may be an interesting topic to explore in the case of coalitions to see how far parties utilize these opportunities consistently and on the same scale as legislative debates.

All in all, this study has provided an interesting opportunity to unpack and explore recent theory on the political communication strategies of coalition parties. Most interestingly, this study has explored this subject in the context of a country and political elite inexperienced in coalition government and the difficulties it presents to governing, campaigning and communicating, and has added to the discussion on this topic.

Bibliography:

Books

Bale, T and Sanderson-Nash, E (2011) *A Leap of Faith and a Leap in the Dark: The Impact of Coalition on the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.* In: Lee, Simon and Beech, Matt (eds.) The Cameron-Clegg Government - Coalition Politics in an Age of Austerity. London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 237-250

Beech, M (2015) 'The Conservative-Liberal Coalition: Examining the Cameron Clegg Government', Palgrave Macmillan, London

Beech, M and Lee, S (2011) *'The Cameron- Clegg Government: Coalition Politics in an age of austerity'* London, Palgrave Macmillan

Benoit, W. L, (2011) 'Content Analysis in Political Communication' *in The Sourcebook for Political Communication Research: Methods, Measures, and Analytical Techniques*. eds Erik P. Bucy, R. Lance Holbert, New York, Routledge

Gould, P. (1998) *The Unfinished Revolution: how modernisers saved the Labour Party*, London, Brown

Krippendorff, Klaus H. (2013) *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications.

Laver, M, and Shepsle, K. (1996). *Making and breaking governments*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Muller, W.C. and Strom, K. (2003) *'Coalition Governments in Western Europe'* eds. Oxford, Oxford University Press

Muller, W.C, Strøm, K, Bergman, T. (2010) '*Cabinets and Coalition Bargaining: The Democratic Life Cycle in Western Europe'*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

Negrine, R. (2007) *'The Professionalization of Political Communication',* New York Intellect Books

Neuendorf, K. (2002) *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications

Perloff. R. (2014) *The Dynamics of Political Communication*, New York, Routledge

Seldon, A. (2015) *The Coalition Effect 2010-2015,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Young, B and Hazell, R. (2012) *Politics of Coalition: How the Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition works,* London, Hart Publishing

Journal Articles

Atkins, J. (2015) 'Together in the National Interest': The Rhetoric of Unity and the Formation of the Cameron–Clegg Government' *The Political Quarterly,* Vol 86, No 1, pp85-92

Back. H, Debus. M, Dumont, P. (2011) 'Who gets what in coalition governments? Predictors of portfolio allocation in parliamentary democracies' *European Journal of Political Research* Vol 50: pp441-478

Boston, J and Bullock, D. (2010) ' Multi Party Governance: Managing the unity-distinctiveness dilemma in executive coalitions' *Party Politics* 18 (3) pp349-368

Debus, M. (2011)'Portfolio allocation and policy compromises: how and why the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives formed a coalition government', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 82, (2), pp293–304.

Evans, E and Sanderson-Nash, E (2011)'From sandals to suits, Professionalisation, Coalition and the Liberal Democrats' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol 13 (4) pp459-473

Falco-Gimeno, A. (2014) 'The use of control mechanisms in Coalition governments: The role of preference tangentiality and repeated interactions' *Party Politics* 2014 Vol. 20 (3) pp341-356

Fortunato, D and Stevenson, R (2013) 'Perceptions of Partisan Ideologies: The effect of coalition participation' *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 57 (2) pp459-477

Fortunato, D and James, A. (2015) 'How voters' perceptions of junior coalition partners depend on the prime minister's position' *European Journal of Political Research* Vol 54 (3) pp601-621

Kavanagh, D. (1996). 'British Party Conferences and Political Rhetoric of the 1990s'. *Government and Opposition, 31*(1), pp27-44.

Kluver. H and Sagarzazu. I, (2012) 'Friends in government and foes in elections: The politics of coalition infighting' available from: http://www.researchgate.net/publication/262484002_Friends_in_government_and_foes_in_elections_The_politics_of_coalition_infighting

Martin, L and Vanberg, G. (2008) 'Coalition Government and Political Communication' *Political Research Quarterly* Vol 61(3) pp502–516.

McEnhill. L , (2015) 'Unity and Distinctiveness in UK Coalition Government: Lessons for Junior Partners', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 86, (1), pp101-109

O'Malley, E. (2010) ' Punchbags for Heavy weights? Minor parties in Irish government' *Irish Political Studies* Vol 25 (4) pp 539-561

Paun, A and Munro, R. (2013)'Endgames: Lessons for the Lib Dems in the final phase of the coalition' *Institute for Government: Briefing paper for the Liberal Democrat Conference 2013* available at

http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/endgames-lessons-lib-dems-final-phase-coalition accessed on 20/07/15

Russman, U. (2012) ' Going negative and going positive in party controlled communication channels' prepared for presentation at the World Congress of Political Science (IPSA) Madrid, July 8-12

Schermann, K and Ensser-Jedenastik, L. (2014) 'Explaining coalition bargaining outcomes: Evidence from Austria, 2002-2008' *Party Politics* Vol 20 (5) pp791-801

Strøm, K and Muller, W.C (1999) 'The keys to togetherness: Coalition agreements in parliamentary democracies', The Journal of Legislative Studies, Vol 5, (3–4) pp. 255–82

Warwick, P, and Druckman J. (2001) 'Portfolio salience and the proportionality of payoffs in coalition governments'. *British Journal of Political Science* Vol 31:pp 627-49.

News Articles:

Eaton, G. (2014)'The smaller coalition party nearly always get smashed- but not all is not lost for the Lib Dems' New Statesman 11/06/14 available at: http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/06/smaller-coalition-party-nearly-always-gets-smashed-all-not-lost-lib-dems accessed on the 28/04/15

Toynbee, P. (2010) 'Lab-Lib – the only legitimate coalition' The Guardian 10/05/10 available at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/10/brown-lib-dem-labour-coalition accessed on 25/07/2015

Watt, N. (2011)' 'Naive' Liberal Democrats have suffered a loss of identity, says Tim Farron' The Guardian 09/09/11 available at: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/sep/09/liberal-democrats-conference-tim-farron accessed on the 20/06/15

Watt, N. (2013) 'Nick Clegg boasts of blocking 16 Tory policies in 'tooth and nail' fight' The Guardian 18/09/13 available at: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/18/nick-clegg-lib-dems-two-party

White, M and Perkins, A. (2002)' 'Nasty Party' warning to Tories' The Guardian 08/10/02 http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2002/oct/08/uk.conservatives2002 accessed on the 22/08/15

Wintour, P and Watt, N. (2010) 'Lib Dems rule out coalition government' The Guardian 08/02/10 available at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/feb/14/liberal-democrats-coalition-hung-parliament accessed on the 15/08/15

Wintour, P. (2010) 'Nick Clegg promises 'biggest shakeup of our democracy since 1832'' 19/05/10 The Guardian available at

http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/may/19/nick-clegg-shakeup-democracy-1832 accessed on the 28/07/15

BBC News 'Election 2010: Lib Dems Manifesto Promises Fairness' available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8618779.stm 14/04/10 accessed on 30/08/15

Blog Articles:

Dommett, K. (2013) 'A miserable little compromise: Why the Liberal Democrats have suffered in coalition', available at http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/a-miserable-little-compromise-why-the-liberal-democrats-have-suffered-in-coalition/ > accessed on the 27/08/15

Polls:

Ipsos Mori Poll, September 2014: Results 'Best party managing the economy over time 2000-2014'

Available at: https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3447/Economy-immigration-and-healthcare-are-Britons-top-three-issues-deciding-general-election-vote.aspx accessed on 18/07/15

Polling Data 2010-2015:

ICM for the Guardian available at http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/

YouGov/ Sunday Times available at http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/

Opinium for the Observer available at http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/

Populus for The Times available at http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/

Appendix A.

Further Information on the Policy Agendas Project Codebook taken from the UK Policy Agendas Project website:

http://www.policyagendas.org.uk/
https://policyagendasuk.wordpress.com/codebook/

The original US Policy Agendas Project developed a comprehensive topic codebook for its policy content coding system, assigning 'major' topic codes for general categories of public policy, such as macroeconomics, the environment, education and health, and 'sub-topics' within each of these categories, identifying the more specific focus of policy. The UK Policy Agendas Project is a national version of the codebook, which retains the original categories but uses UK examples to aid the user. The codebook was established as part of an ESRC project that traced the attention of British government to different policy topics from 1945, showing how issues have risen and fallen over time. The codebook reports UK-specific examples or clarifications (as additions to the original US codebook), while new sub-topics (e.g. fisheries). The UK Policy Agendas Codebook was last updated February 2010 by Will Jennings and Shaun Bevan.

The major policy topic codes used in this study for the UK are:

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration and Civil Liberties
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labour and Employment
6. Education
7. Environment
8. Energy
10. Transportation
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13. Social Welfare
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
15. Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16. Defence
17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications
18. Foreign Trade
19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20. Government Operations
21. Public Lands and Water Management (Territorial Issues)

Appendix B.

Coding Scheme used to analyse the sentiment of the press releases and party conference speeches:

Alignment:

- Comments on the 'success of the coalition' and its flagship policies
- Positive mentions of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats working together
- Openly supporting or praising Conservative-led policies within the coalition
- Criticisms of the Labour Party from the point of view of 'the government' and by extension the coalition

Differentiation-

- Negatively commenting on the Conservative's issue positions or attitudes towards specific policies
- Criticizing the Conservative's for policy decisions in government during the coalition
- Highlighting the differences between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in a negative way, (ie. "Unlike the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats think that child poverty is the most important…")
- Attacking the Labour Party and the Conservatives- 'clubbing them together' in a negative light
- Emphasising the singular profile of the Liberal Democrats and the policies that only they are offering (ie." Only the Liberal Democrats are calling for more funding for the NHS…")

End