

Why the Lib Dems are wrong to run on policies, not values

Written by The Conversation

Voters are being besieged with competing pledges on housing, taxation, public spending, education and the environment. Digesting this onslaught of information and actually deciding who to vote for is not at all easy.

A range of electoral [tools](#) such as [Vote Match](#) , [Vote for Policies](#) and other quizzes have been launched to help the public navigate the minefield of information – but they generally focus on parties' policies, on the premise that people vote for whoever seems most likely to advance their interests.

Thinking about politics in terms of concrete policies is useful, but in terms of distinguishing between the parties it is often the values, beliefs and visions that are more important. Voters don't necessarily want to simply advance their own personal interests; they want to elect people who share their values and advance their ideals.

And distinguishing between the parties' values is only getting more difficult.

All the same

While party politics once revolved around stark ideological differences, today's parties seem to be much the same. This is partly because party leaders don't tend to talk about their values very much – and when they do, politicians from other parties tend to talk about the same ones.

The result is that the 2015 campaign has been particularly notable because of the lack of distinctive visions and ideas. All Britain's main parties have become less [overtly ideological](#) over time – but still, this election is surprisingly bereft of big ideas.

In 2010, the Conservative party had its notion of the “ [Big Society](#) ” and the Liberal Democrats emphasised the need for greater “

[fairness](#)

” across all aspects of government. Today's electoral debates have instead tended to focus on policy issues and competence, with ideology playing only a marginal role.

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This is particularly evident in the Lib Dem campaign. Last time around, the party focused on presenting an idealistic vision of the kind of country it wanted to help create; this time around, it's putting much more emphasis on key policy pledges and achievements. This reflects the Lib Dems' time in government, but it also means their message sounds more like Labour's and the Conservatives' than it ever has before. Danny Alexander's news-grabbing [intervention](#) in the campaign on Tory plans for welfare cuts is a policy attack, not an ideological one, and it shows how the Lib Dems are now fighting on the same ground as the other parties.

Take the front page of the Liberal Democrats' [manifesto](#) where the party has outlined a number of key pledges. These do reference values, but they are hardly distinctive. It's hard to imagine any party not agreeing with the message of "prosperity for all", "fair taxes" and "opportunity for every child". Who wouldn't want "opportunity for every child"?

The Liberal Democrats' approach to campaigning may appear rational since it targets voters interests, but it does make it difficult to make out what the party actually stands for. With voters crying out for a way to distinguish between the parties, this approach may be somewhat of a miscalculation.

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