

Students fees vote: Some benchmarks

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For much of the post-war period, a large third party backbench rebellion was a physical impossibility because the number of Liberal MPs in the House of Commons was so small. Yet even after the party grew in size after 1997, the most striking feature of the Lib Dems in the Commons is that they have been by far the most cohesive of the main political parties. (In the last parliament, there were a mere 39 divisions between 2005 and 2010 in which even a single Lib Dem MP voted against the whip). And even when they did rebel, they did not rebel in great numbers. The largest Lib Dem rebellion ever came over the mining of limestone in April 2002 when 15 MPs voted against a Budget Resolution.

Benchmarks

As a result, it will be relatively easy for tonight's rebellion to set some records for the party.

- if 11 Liberal Democrat MPs vote against the whip, it will be the largest Lib Dem rebellion so far this Parliament. (The current record is 10, on an amendment to the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill in November).
- if 16 Liberal Democrat MPs vote against the whip, it will be the largest Lib Dem rebellion since the party was founded in 1988-89.
- if 30 Liberal Democrat MPs vote against the whip (something we doubt very much), it will be the largest rebellion by the Liberal Democrats or any of their predecessor parties since the Maurice Debate of 1918, which saw the Liberal Party split in two.

In absolute terms, these are relatively small numbers – but then, the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party remains relatively small. As a very crude measure, multiple these figures by seven to get an approximation of what this rebellion would mean if it were taking place amongst a governing parliamentary party consisting of just one party.

Even this measure does not really capture the scale of any rebellion *within* the Lib Dems, given that the frontbench is currently a larger proportion of the party than elsewhere. The relaxation of collective responsibility (partially) to exclude PPSs, plus the possibility of resignations, makes it difficult to predict the numbers required, but at the moment the size of the backbench is 35. A rebellion of 18 from within those 35 would therefore involve more than half the party's backbenchers. That is what happened to Labour over Iraq in 2003, which gives a good indication of the relative scale of the possible revolt.

* Both authors are from the University of Nottingham, which has funded this research. Further details of the research project from which this note draws are available from www.revolts.co.uk.

Watch out for churn

The possibility of a four way split, on any 'delaying' amendment, may sound like bad news for the government. But it will also allow the whips to practice the age old tactic of divide and rule.

Imagine you have two MPs – let's call them Greg and Tim, just for the sake of argument. Both dislike a policy and/or feel they need to vote against it to save face with their constituents. If both vote against, you lose. But with two different votes coming up, then you say to Greg: 'Listen, we understand your position. Sure, vote for the amendment, but if the amendment falls, then we'll need your support on the main motion'. To Tim you say the opposite: 'Listen, we understand your position. As long as you back us on the amendment, we will understand entirely if you vote against over the main motion'. Both vote against. Both save face. Both can tell their constituents they defied the whips, and voted against the measure. But because both did so at different times, the government still gets its policy through.

We first drew attention to this over foundation hospitals back in 2004, when enough MPs rebelled to defeat the measure, but they rebelled at different times, on different measures. It has happened frequently since. So if there are two votes watch out for the churn between them.

Watch out for double votes

Lib Dem MPs have become particularly keen on the practice of voting twice in divisions in order to register an abstention. If they do that tonight, checking the size of the no lobby alone will not be sufficient, and could over-estimate the size of any rebellion.

Majority

The Coalition has enjoyed comfortable majorities up until now. The lowest Government majority thus far (on a whipped vote) has been 51 (on the Programme motion for the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill on 6 September). So, almost regardless of the size of the Lib Dem rebellion, the majority will be the lowest since the election.

This is the Coalition's first serious test in the Commons, although it is one that we think they will win, relatively comfortably.