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British politician advised by Californians

S.F. political team advises Nick Clegg

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British politician Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats party - not long ago considered a footnote in British elections - got a little help from his friends in California when he delivered knockout performances in a recent series of televised debates that are now credited with turning Thursday's election into a nail-biter not seen in Britain for more than 30 years.

Clegg turned for debate preparation to San Francisco's SCN Strategies - the veteran team of California Democratic political consultants who also advise Sen. Barbara Boxer, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom's campaign for lieutenant governor, and San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris' attorney general run; as well as Level the Playing Field 2010, the independent expenditure group backing gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown.

SCN - the initials represent partners Averell "Ace" Smith, Sean Clegg (no relation to the British politician), and Dan Newman - was drafted to work for Nick Clegg by Democratic political consultant Rick Ridder, who heads RDI Strategies and Research in Denver. Ridder has advised the Liberal Democrats for nearly 20 years.

Ridder said he chose the firm of Smith - who managed Sen. Hillary Rodham

Clinton's winning presidential primary campaigns in California and Texas - because the veteran San Francisco operatives had a wealth of experience preparing candidates in the especially tricky nature of multi-candidate debates.

And, he added, the stakes for Britain's Liberal Democrats are high.

Most political observers in the United Kingdom have long predicted that the Conservative Party, headed by David Cameron, would take back power from the Labor Party headed by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, which has dominated British politics for more than a decade. The Conservatives remain in the lead in the latest polls.

But many post-debate observers say Clegg so dramatically boosted his party's chances that the Liberal Democrats may not only deny the Tories a parliamentary majority, but increase their own seats in Parliament.

The critical debates that ran on national television for 90 minutes each "put us on equal footing - and allowed the light to shine on a very capable and extraordinary candidate in Nick Clegg," Ridder said.

As voters prepare to go the polls Thursday, the development underscores the increasing influence of election factors that have long played important roles in U.S. politics - including "presidential-style TV debates, 'spin room,' 24-hour media and social media," says veteran political strategist Kirsten Xanthippe in London, who has also worked for many years with the California Democratic Party.

Though big-ticket political debates are a relatively new phenomenon in Britain, the broadcasts were compelling: far more lively and combative than their hyper-controlled American counterparts, experts say. And they were so closely watched that voter turnout is expected to be nearly 80 percent, about 20 points higher than the 2005 election.

SCN's Newman says that, as in the United States, "voter frustration with the economy has created a tough political environment for (British) incumbents and any candidate seen as part of the political establishment."

So Nick Clegg, "had to make the case that he represents a fresh start, a real change and a new way forward," Newman said.

California politicians could take a lesson from Clegg's winning performance: He was "clear and compelling," Newman said. "And he generally avoided following the other candidates' petty mudslinging or esoteric blather" on arcane issues that don't resonate with voters.

Indeed, after rave reviews in the first debate, Clegg became the focus of attacks from both sides, Newman said.

But "he rose to the challenge - and used flawless debate jujitsu to turn the onslaught of attacks" into the argument that he represents a "clear break with the failed politicians and politics of the past."

The real results will come on Thursday, but most experts think Clegg "hit the ball out of the park," Newman said - "or 'hit it for 6 out of the ground' as cricket fans might say over there."

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