

Internal Democratic Reform
Our Democracy: One Member, One Vote

Background

This consultation paper has been produced by the Democratic Reform Group, a Working Group of the Federal Executive. The group has been asked to examine the democratic processes of the party in consultation with party members, with the intention of producing recommendations for change to be debated at Party Conference.

Comments on this paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to Sue Doughty at reform@libdems.org.uk or c/o Rachael Clarke, LDHQ, 8-10 Great George Street, London, SW1P 3AE.

Comments on this paper should reach us as soon as possible and in any event no later than 4th April 2014.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Liberal Democrats are indisputably the most democratic of the main political parties. Not only do our members vote for their local candidates, but our President and Leader are both elected on a 'One Member, One Vote' basis. Perhaps even more importantly, our members elect conference representatives who have the power to vote on policy motions at conference, and to elect the committees who govern our party.
- 1.2. In 1988, our members' rights to involvement were laid out in the best way available at the time. However, in the past 25 years, there have been significant changes in lifestyle, technology, the wider political system, and our members' expectations. People are not necessarily involved primarily at the local level as they were when the party was founded. Many are involved with online activism, which allows anybody to engage with any issue regardless of personal circumstances. And membership of major political parties has declined from 3.3% of the electorate in 1987, to just 1% in 2010¹.
- 1.3. In response to these developments, the Federal Executive (FE) are consulting on broadening of mandate so that that key decisions on policy, and federal party committees would be made by all party members rather than conference representatives alone (henceforth, 'One Member, One Vote').
- 1.4. Separately the Federal Executive has made proposals for the Interim Peers Panel to be elected on a One Member, One Vote basis – rather than by Conference Representatives as they are currently.

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125.pdf>, Table 2

- 1.5. The proposals for consideration in this paper are a big first step towards improving democracy within the party, and could be achieved with minimal additional staff resource and budget. This does not, however, imply that other changes will not be considered in the future - especially those relating to increased digital involvement with conference.
- 1.6. We will be running a consultation session in the main auditorium at Spring Conference 2014 in York. This will be held at lunchtime on Saturday 8th March. We are also eager to hear from all members – whether or not you attend conference or are a voting representative.

2. Who runs the party?

- 2.1. *“...the Conference shall be the sovereign representative body of the Party, and shall have the power to determine the policy of the Party...”* (Art 6.7, Federal Constitution)
- 2.2. The Federal Constitution of the Liberal Democrats places responsibility for electing Federal Committees and making policy decisions on Voting Conference Representatives. These Representatives are elected by local parties at their AGM in a number related to the size of a local party’s membership. They also include a number of other ex officio members (including MPs, MEPs, MSPs, AMs, PPCs, Mayors, and Principal Authority Council Group Leaders).
- 2.3. Once elected or fulfilling one of the roles listed in Article 6.1 of the Federal Constitution, Conference Representatives are all equal to one another – and the vote of one local party representatives bears no difference to that of the Party Leader.

- 2.4. Currently, only the Leader and the President of the Party are elected by all members at a national level. At a local level, all members who attend a selection meeting (and who have been members for more than a year in England) are eligible to vote in Council, PCC, Mayoral, and Parliamentary selections.
- 2.5. In 1988, the existing system made sense. It is based at a local level, where the majority of campaigning was done. It allowed policy discussions not just on local issues, but on national issues – which were then debated at Federal Conference. However, with social media and a heavy online presence, particularly for those who are less able to meet on weekday evenings, the local focus is bound to have declined.
- 2.6. This is exemplified by the ways that people join the party. In the past, recruitment of new members and retention of existing members has mainly been by local parties on the doorstep but this has, in recent years been overtaken by applications to join directly either by the website or through central recruitment campaigns – which now account for around two thirds of recruitments. As a result, new members may not identify so strongly with the local party as once was the case.

3. Voting on Party Policy

- 3.1. Members voting on party policy is fundamental to the running of the Liberal Democrats as a democratic party. Additionally, in membership surveys, involvement in the policy-making process consistently emerges as the main reason why people become members of the party. However, the fact remains that at present, engagement with the policy-

making process is reserved for those members elected as Conference Representatives.

3.2. There are several weaknesses with the existing system which reduces the ability of all party members to become engaged in the policy-making process. This weakness is, we believe, detrimental to the democratic credentials of the party, and also has an impact on the ability of the party to retain new members whose primary interest is in making policy. Some key weaknesses are listed below.

3.3. **Inequality of access to voting positions**

Due to the expense and time commitment for conference attendance, in many parties there is a trend for well-established members to attend, with limited opportunities for newer members to be elected as voting representatives. This is especially true in larger, more established local parties – particularly those in wealthier areas, where voting representative elections are hotly contested. Whereas in another local party just next door, becoming a voting representative simply requires submitting your nomination papers. This, essentially, means the voting representative system perpetuates a ‘democratic rights by postcode lottery’ model.

3.4. **Lack of attendance by Voting Conference Representatives**

Not all voting representatives go to conference. For 2013, local parties only elected 81% of the voting representatives to which they were entitled. Of those representatives elected, less than half attended Autumn Conference 2013 – meaning that the total Federal Representation was 37.9%. For the past two autumn Conferences (Glasgow and Brighton), a significant number of local parties have sent no attendees

whatsoever – meaning 5000 members had no input at all into the policy-making process. Additionally, around 1/3^d of members who attend any given conference on a full pass are not voting representatives.

3.5. Bias against new member involvement

At present all party policy is voted on at conference by these representatives, but this can lead to a bias against newer members speaking and voting on policy. Although there are no rules to prevent full pass holders speaking at conference, there can be a sense of dislocation from debate if they are not able to vote at its conclusion. If the conference were opened up to all party members, we believe that this would enable and encourage more participation, especially in key debates.

3.6. Lack of diversity in Voting Conference Representatives

There are those who cannot attend conference for a number of reasons, for example caring responsibilities, demands of work, or financial considerations. This means that voting conference representatives are, overwhelmingly, educated, retired, middle class, white men – to a much greater degree than the party as a whole. This system, therefore, perpetuates bias when so much of our policy and so many of our principles are designed to allow equal access to all.

3.7. Lack of democracy in certain local parties

Perhaps most worryingly from a democratic viewpoint, those members who have the misfortune to live in an area where there are few existing Liberal Democrats, or where their local party does not abide by State Party rules, may lose all democratic rights at a Federal level. If a local party has fewer than 30 members, has not notified us of their Chair or Treasurer for the current year, or has not sent in their PPERA

returns for a period, they are not entitled to send voting representatives to conference. Around 15% of local parties currently fall foul of one of these qualifications.

- 3.8. Proposals at the current time are to allow only those members in the conference hall to vote on policy. We have considered the possibility of remote voting (via internet) on policy but believe that this needs much more consideration and we will be looking into this at a later date. In particular there is a considerable cost implication relating to the introduction of the technology, as well as the need to understand its possible impact on conference attendance as a whole.

4. Election to Party Bodies

- 4.1. Elections to four Federal Party committees (FE, FPC, FCC, International Relations Committee) takes place every two years, shortly after the Autumn conference. Many of the people elected to the committees are well-known to conference attenders, and this is consistent with the need for members of the Federal Policy, Federal Executive and the Federal Conference committees to attend conference.

4.2. Weaknesses of a Conference-centric election

As a result of the existing nomination and electoral process, those members who are not voting conference representatives are at an automatic disadvantage when they may wish to seek election. Given our earlier concerns about the ability of certain groups to be elected as voting representatives, or to attend conference, this disadvantage quickly translates into under-representation of certain groups on key party committees. Similarly, those members from small local parties may also find it

difficult to find it difficult to agglomerate the required signatures for a nomination.

4.3. Logistics of extending the franchise

Voting is now conducted both electronically, for those members who wish it, or by post for all other members. Extension of the vote may lead to increased cost to the party of printing and posting but it is now possible to make manifestos available electronically together with electronic voting. Reminders to members for whom we have a correct email address sent out in, say, July and September to request an electronic vote could help reduce the cost of postal voting. Although early uses of alphabetised lists show that there is no major impact on number of votes compared to the necessity of scrolling down to find a name, it is also possible to randomise candidate lists to avoid bias towards those whose names are at the beginning of the alphabet.

4.4. Election of 'big name' candidates

In the past, there have been some concerns that all member elections show a bias towards candidates with well-known names more than elections in which only voting representatives have a vote. This could be seen as related to the wider membership not being sufficiently familiar with 'ordinary' individuals who stand for election to committees. Others argue that our members should be trusted to decide themselves who the best candidates for role are – and that it is fundamentally undemocratic to bar certain groups of party members from standing. It could also be argued that voters having a consistent familiarity with candidates for election has resulted in an ever-smaller circle of members who are likely to both stand for committees and be elected.

1. *Do you agree with the issues identified with the current system in this consultation paper? Do you have any additional issues on the topic of voting that you would like to draw FE's attention to?*
2. *Should the party use a 'One Member, One Vote' method for all votes at conference?*
3. *Should the party use a 'One Member, One Vote' method for committee elections?*
4. *If you do not agree with the 'One Member, One Vote' method, how do you propose addressing the issues as outlined in this paper/in your response to question 1?*
5. *How can we open up policy debates to those who cannot attend conference?*
6. *Do other opportunities exist for improving the democracy of the party?*