

# Party political conferences – A key site for research impact

*Party political conferences provide a unique opportunity for academics to engage with politicians and the policymaking process, as well as a variety of different stakeholders in any given policy issue. In this post, **Dr Grace Lordan, Professor Tony Travers, Dr Anna Valero and Megan Marsh** describe how academics and the public affairs team at LSE have used party political conferences to contribute to ongoing policy debates and drive the impact of academic research.*

One of the principle mechanisms for delivering research impact is improving and broadening the quality of public debate, through furthering dialogue and sharing ideas among experts, non-specialist audiences, and policy makers. No small task, but political party conferences provide an exciting and fertile space to do just that.

In the UK, party conferences are a key fixture of the political calendar. They are a time for political parties to reflect on their approaches to local, national and global issues and explore a range of solutions to the challenges of the day. And they're a time for big-ticket changes to party policy. Just this year, Labour agreed their final Brexit position, while the Liberal Democrats agreed to revoke Article 50 outright if they come into power.

While there are always passionate contributions in the main conference hall, where big-name politicians jostle to hit the headlines and dominate social media, it's outside the hall where detailed discussions take place and impact can be made. This is the fringe – a roster of hundreds of events over three to four days, where tempers are lost and arguments are won. It's here that academics and academic research can make a clear impact on policy-makers and policy.

Many organisations put on fringe events, from think tanks and charities, to business and special interest groups. All hoping to pull together an influential panel and get their voices and ideas heard above the tumult. Recently, a number of universities have also been hosting fringe events, either going it alone or partnering up with other universities or think tanks, to increase the potential impact of their work. Having academics on panels at conference is an increasingly popular option for organisers: to provide factual context and intellectual rigour; fill gaps in evidence that policy makers have identified; and, in particular, offer new policy solutions to real-world problems.

If you want to partner with other organisations in this way, it is always worth checking a month before each party conference, what presence they plan to have at conference and the themes they plan to address. As, fringe events being what they are, line ups are often only confirmed a couple of days before the event and there are thus opportunities for academics to speak on panels aligned with your own interests. It is also worth noting, that not all impact at party conferences is necessarily political. The variety of organisations present means there is significant scope to have conversations outside the immediately political; with groups ranging from, local business and interest groups based in the host city to major national and international organisations.



LSE has been putting on a fringe event for the last five years, covering topics such as national skills gaps, the future of international trade, and most recently regional disparities. Prof Tony Travers a regular participant in these events says of their knowledge brokering potential:

“I have attended party conferences with LSE for many years, and find them fantastic and valuable opportunities to build new networks and present research to decision-makers. They can certainly be what you make of them. Attending fringe events in your area of interest is a great way to strike up conversations and ask questions of the panel (but don’t forget to introduce yourself first), and informal discussions with politicians and other organisations in the fringe and the exhibition hall can easily lead to significant and visible follow up. After doing a few circuits you may be asked to be on future panels and chair events on similar topics. If I had one piece of advice it would be to really get involved in the conference by soaking up the political atmosphere, which can really help you consider how your research fits into the wider policy-making landscape, and what your next steps might be to have real-world impact”.

Party conferences can therefore be a productive place to maximise the impact of your research by giving researchers the chance to consider how their research fits into the larger political narratives. This is particularly the case, if it is timely research in a policy area that is having its time in the sun (or more likely rain as the conferences season is in autumn). In this respect, a policy recommendation stemming directly from a piece of research can be elusive, but with a bit of reflection there are ways to bring recommendations to the fore in a way that can have real impact with policy makers, particularly if the timing is right. These interactions may not tie directly into your research plans, but having the opportunity to initiate interactions and present your research can be invaluable. Dr Anna Valero attended both the 2019 Labour Party Conference in Brighton and Conservative Party Conference in Manchester and said of her first time experience:

“Each offered a different and interesting experience, though Brexit was very much front and centre of everyone’s thinking. At the panels I spoke on, I adapted my research to focus in on key areas relevant to each party’s priorities, but maintained the central message that I wanted to get across to all policy-makers. Having a one minute summary of my research and its relevance for policy was essential for quick conversations during the conferences and I found politicians receptive to data and evidence. While it was great to have some meetings lined up ahead of time, a couple more were had on the spot, including with regional representatives around my research on innovation and regional disparities. I also had the opportunity to tie in other relevant research from across LSE. I have used a number of conversations I have had to plan how to maximise the reach and impact of my upcoming, and previous, research. Debating directly with politicians has been a very useful experience and I look forward to the follow up.”

This highlights another important point, that if you are attending any of the party conferences, there is a need to be prepared and to go along with knowledge of the current political scene. This is where you might want to get in touch with your public affairs/communications teams to allow you to be prepared for more serendipitous encounters, which are partly what make party conferences so interesting for all attendees. Familiarising yourself with a brief background of the key policy makers who might have an interest in your research before arriving is essential.

Research can of course be used to back up existing positions, however research can also be used to influence those positions and persuade some to reflect on what the evidence is telling us. Dr Grace Lordan, who took part in her first party conference fringe events in 2018 has pinpointed that opportunity as a way to really explore the impact her research around the future of skills can, and has had, among policy makers.

“My attendance at party conferences in 2018 led to a number of impactful events, including a productive meeting with the Business Minister where I was introduced to a number of valuable contacts, and hosting a roundtable on skills with senior civil servants from No 10, the Department for Education and beyond. It was wonderful to be in front of politicians talking about my research and how my findings might guide them in their policy making. One such conversation led to me taking my research to the respective Government Department working on policy around skills. Joining up with BEIS [Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy] was a good experience in a number of ways including them backing my work for an ESRC grant with the What Works Centre for Wellbeing. At the same time, the party conferences connected me to industry partners such as Google, Amazon and others at the forefront of innovation. Together, the experience has allowed me draw connections across public policy and industry, which is invaluable when researching the future of skills. It is also worth stating that my participation was made so easy, by the in house Communications Division. Overall, the experience was fantastic.”

Based on the above reflections, three key things to bear in mind if you are asked to be on a panel at party conference (apart from saying yes, of course!) would be:

- Be prepared and put some time aside to get up to speed on the political moment, don't be afraid to make use of the expertise that is often available amongst professional service staff at your institution.
- Be flexible in your approach to conference by making full use of the different opportunities and audiences at conference;
- Understand that whilst party conferences can be a means to directly engage with policymaking, influencing policy is also a non-linear process and attending party conferences can be just as useful in linking you to knowledge and networks that will enable you to develop the impact of your research over a longer period.

Finally, if your research is relevant and likely to have a political impact, it is never too early to be planning for the next conference. At LSE, the Public Affairs team will already be starting work on our presence at the next round of party conferences.

## About the authors



**Megan Marsh** is part of the Public Affairs team based in the Communications Division at the LSE. The Public Affairs team at LSE help academics to maximise the policy impact of their research and to integrate LSE expertise into Government and political priorities, including the UK Industrial Strategy “Grand Challenges” and other pressing economic and social issues. Prior to joining LSE, Megan worked in Parliament over a number of years.



**Dr Grace Lordan** is an associate professor in behavioural science at the London School of Economics. She is an economist by background, and her research is focused on understanding occupational sorting and has expertise on the effects of unconscious bias, discrimination and technology changes. Grace is also interested in using the techniques of behavioural science to design interventions for firms to promote good conduct, diversity and inclusion and curb biases that creep into high stakes decision making. Grace is focused on helping firms understand 'what works' at a local level so that they are certain they are rolling out interventions that have a positive net present value. Grace has advised and given talks to large investment banks and international conferences on these topics. Grace has also led projects to advise commissioners in the UK and policy makers in the EC. At the LSE Grace is the director of the MSc in behavioural science and teaches Corporate Behaviour and Decision making.



**Professor Tony Travers** is Visiting Professor in LSE's Department of Government and Director of LSE London. An expert in, and prolific commentator on, the UK public sector and local government, he has advised the Commons Education and the CLG Select Committees and conducted extensive research on issues including local and regional government, cities, and public finance. He has written several books including *London's Boroughs at 50* (2015), *The Politics of London: Governing an Ungovernable City* (2003) and *The Politics of Local Government Finance* (1987). He chaired the London Finance Commission for two London Mayors.



**Dr Anna Valero** is a researcher based at LSE focused on analysing the intersection of productivity, innovation and the role of skills and universities in understanding differences in economic performances between firms and regions. She also focuses on UK productivity and industrial strategy, and in 2017 was a research director for the LSE Growth Commission. Prior to joining LSE's Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), Anna was manager of Deloitte's Economic Consulting firm and is a qualified chartered accountant.

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