

Ofcom should count the Greens as a major party

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Ofcom's consultation on their draft list of 'major parties' for the 2015 election contained one particularly controversial omission: the Green Party of England and Wales (including the Scottish Green Party for the purposes of the consultation). In this post, [Andrew Fleming](#) examines Ofcom's application of their own criteria in making this decision, and then considers some other factors overlooked in Ofcom's analysis.



Although over 275,000 members of the public signed a [change.org petition](#) for the Greens' leader, Natalie Bennett, to be included in the televised Leaders' Debates ahead of the general election, [Ofcom have concluded](#) that the Green Party 'has not sufficiently demonstrated evidence of past electoral support and current support to qualify for major party status in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.' Nationally, the Greens are consistently polling neck-and-neck with the Liberal Democrats, though as a party of government it currently hard to dispute the Lib Dems' status as a major party. A more interesting comparison, however, is with the other major rising political party in British politics, the UK Independence Party, who were deemed worthy of inclusion.

Ofcom's first criterion – past electoral success – is initially persuasive as grounds for rejecting the Greens: they won 1% of the vote at the 2010 general election (albeit contesting 50% fewer seats than they will this May). Despite this, they did return one MP, Caroline Lucas, for Brighton Pavilion. As Ofcom's own report notes, however, UKIP support was similarly ephemeral at the last election, achieving between 0.7 and 3.5% of the vote, with no MPs elected at all. UKIP have subsequently returned two MPs by means of by-elections, though as Ofcom's own report argues, 'levels of support indicated by by-election outcomes may reflect specific circumstances that do not necessarily apply to a General Election'. Commons representation, therefore, would seem to be unsteady ground for rejecting the Greens while accepting UKIP. The report also makes the case for UKIP inclusion on the basis of strong polling in the European elections. Whilst UKIP made great strides in terms of European representation in May 2014, the Greens have consistently returned MEPs, increasing their representation by 50% in 2014 and, fulfilling Ofcom's apparent criterion of sustained success, have done so for just as long as UKIP; Jean Lambert has sat as the Green MEP for London since 1999, when UKIP elected their first MEPs.

Ofcom's criteria for inclusion, therefore, appear to have been inconsistently applied between the Green Party and UKIP. 'Past electoral support and current support' are also, moreover, very narrowly defined within the report. This is most obviously the case with regard to membership. The [Greens enjoyed an increase in membership](#) of more than 100% over the course of 2014, bringing them to a total of roughly 37,000 members across England, Wales and Scotland. This still lags considerably behind the Conservative and Labour membership totals of roughly 190,000 each, though it is worth noting that the precipitous decline in membership of both, from their mid-century peaks of 2.8 million and 1 million respectively, is an on-going phenomenon. However, current Green Party membership compares favourably with both the Liberal Democrats, who have also experienced a depletion of their membership down to 49,000, and UKIP, who stand on around 39,000. This '[Green surge](#)', as it has been dubbed in the media, proved to be an unexpectedly sustained phenomenon throughout 2014; if these trends continue, in tandem with declining Liberal Democrat membership, the party may well match both UKIP and the Lib Dems by the time of the election in May.

Membership of a political party is, of course, a useful metric for political engagement. This has been a hot topic in recent years; despite an increase in turnout from the 2001 and 2005 elections, the 2010 total of 65.1% was still [one of the lowest of the postwar period](#), with turnout at local and European elections lower still. Turnout amongst the young has been particularly low, at only 51.8% in 2010 (and even lower in 2005, when it dipped below 40% for the first time in the modern era). In this light, it is important to note that the Greens are particularly appealing to young

people and first time voters, two groups frequently identified as being particularly disengaged from politics. The Greens are currently polling [second amongst students](#), joint [second among 18-24s](#), and [third among first time voters](#). Membership of the Young Greens grew by 400% in 2014, far outstripping the already impressive growth of the party as a whole.

In the context of televised leaders' debates, it is also notable that the Greens are the only party under consideration for inclusion in Ofcom's consultation to be led by a woman. Women, especially young women, have also been identified as a sector of the electorate increasingly disengaged from politics; [1.1 million more men than women voted in 2010](#), a gap that has steadily grown in recent years. This has frequently been attributed to the [under-representation of women in politics](#), with a House of Commons that is 78% male, and a House of Lords in which 76% of members are men. However, women in the Green Party are unusually well-represented in comparison with other parties; in addition to Natalie Bennett, female Greens sit in both the lower and upper house (Caroline Lucas and Baroness Jenny Jones), and as members of the European Parliament (Jean Lambert and Molly Scott Cato). There is [some evidence](#) that the Green Party are more popular amongst women than men in the run-up to the election, although this will become clearer as further polling data is accumulated.

On these grounds, it seems an oversight to disregard as minor one of the only political parties that seems able to mobilise such disenfranchised groups in the run-up to the May elections. This is particularly the case given the inconsistent application of Ofcom's other criteria for determining this – past and current electoral and polling support – when compared to their assessment of UKIP and the Liberal Democrats. Ofcom's consultation remains open for another month. With the Prime Minister having ruled out the prospect of a Green-less televised debate, alongside senior Labour figures such as Sadiq Khan, we can expect further debate about their inclusion in that time.

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