

# Conservative members have less influence on policy than those in the other major parties

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*David Cameron's speech to the Conservative Party conference in Manchester today marks the end of the major parties' conference season. In the [2012 audit](#) of UK democracy, **Stuart Wilks-Heeg**, **Andrew Blick**, and **Stephen Crone** considered how influential members were on political party policies, including via conferences and other mechanisms. They found varying levels of influence across the major parties, with Conservative members having the least sway over policy.*



How much influence do Conservative members have over party policy? Credit: Conservatives (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

While there is much truth in the characterisation of contemporary UK political parties as 'electoral professional' organisations, it can also be argued that it 'does not quite describe the realities of modern British party politics'. Indeed, as [Childs](#) notes, there is plenty of evidence that party leaders would like to have more members and activists to call on, and that they would prefer their parties to be less reliant on big donors. In many ways, the more significant tension is that 'despite wanting to attract more members, party leaderships remain wary of giving their membership too much power'.

It is equally important to distinguish between the membership at large and the rather smaller core of party activists who, in the past, mediated much of the interaction between members and leaders. It is widely accepted, for instance, that internal Labour Party reforms from the early 1990s onwards were motivated by a desire to empower members as a check on the influence of activists, who were deemed by party leaders to be more left-wing than either the parliamentary party or the wider membership. In this sense, apparently democratising reforms can be [managed by party leaders](#) to help modernise a party and enhance central. For these reasons, our [2002 Audit](#) noted that signs of UK political parties becoming more internally democratic tended to co-exist alongside indicators of the very opposite trend.

While the manner in which UK parties select their leaders shows a degree of convergence, mechanisms for involving members and, indeed, non-members in other aspects of party decision-making exhibit quite different trends. The degree of internal democracy within the UK's political parties varies enormously. Prior to the last general election, the campaign organisation [Unlock Democracy](#) evaluated the extent to which the UK's largest political parties showed a strong commitment to democracy, including an assessment of the degree to which members and non-members could influence party policy and candidate selection. This assessment suggested that, among the three main parties, internal democracy is weakest within the Conservative Party and strongest within the Liberal Democrats, although Labour gained some recognition for granting a role for members of affiliated trade unions and socialist societies. Among the smaller parties, internal democracy is generally much stronger – most notably in the cases of the Greens, Plaid Cymru and the SNP, although Unlock Democracy found limited evidence of mechanisms for engaging non-members. The BNP, by contrast, was found to be highly centralised.

## **Role of party conferences**

The nature of membership involvement in party conferences offers important clues about the extent of member influence on political parties more generally. The role of party conferences in determining party policy contrasts markedly between the three main parties. These differences have been neatly [captured by Peter Facey](#), Unlock Democracy's Director, in the following terms: 'the Liberal Democrat conference thinks it makes policy and it does, the Labour conference thinks it makes policy but doesn't and the Conservative conference knows it doesn't make policy and doesn't care'. That said, there has been something of a [common trend](#) across the three largest parties for conferences to become showcase media events, rather than forums for policy deliberation, although this tendency is clearly less pronounced for the Liberal Democrats. To some extent these developments are understandable. Party leaders are keen to avoid what they see as highly damaging media coverage of disunity or adoption of policies which risk being a 'difficult sell' to voters. Yet, the changing nature of party conferences has clearly become a source of frustration for some party members, as [Tony Benn expressed](#) in his reflections on Labour's 2000 annual conference: 'Once we had regular and proper argument [...] now we just let off balloons, sing pop songs, greet showbiz celebrities and, if we're lucky, have the odd debate'.

## **Labour**

While Benn's nostalgia for the atmosphere of past Labour conferences will not be universally shared within the party, his observations do help highlight wider issues about how members are supposed to be able to shape party policy. Labour's formal processes for engaging party members in policy development are complex and reflect a wider tendency for party leaders to attempt to recast opportunities for member involvement in a way which shifts policy debate away from party conferences. [Reforms](#) were introduced by Tony Blair in 1997 as part of his Partnership in Power agenda, through which 'Labour's policy machinery was completely revamped'. Under these arrangements, Labour Party policy is determined by a [National Policy Forum](#), based on reports from six policy commissions and with the process steered by a Joint Policy Committee. Despite some relatively optimistic initial assessment of these reforms, dissatisfaction with them began to mount during the 2000s – notwithstanding attempts to bolster the role of policy commissions. The mechanisms for policy-making were later reviewed as part of the '[Refounding Labour](#)' initiative, overseen by Peter Hain MP.

## **Liberal Democrats**

It is widely recognised that, of the three main parties, the Liberal Democrats grant the fullest degree of influence over policy to their members. Formally, the Liberal Democrats are a highly decentralised party, organised on a federal basis, and with considerable autonomy provided to: the state parties (England, Scotland and Wales), regional parties (for the English regions), local parties, and Specified Associated Organisations (e.g. Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors; Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats). All of these organisational sub-units can, for instance, submit motions to the federal conference, which serves as the sovereign policy-making body for the party. However, it is generally recognised that most substantive policy is developed by the Federal Policy Committee,

which is chaired by the party leader. It has also been [argued](#) that the reality of policy-making within the Liberal Democrats is that MPs play a far more significant role than is generally recognised: ‘the parliamentary party has established a relatively tight grip on the policy-making mechanisms within the Liberal Democrats despite the constitutional limits on its power’. Much the same argument [can be made](#) with regard to the role of the parliamentary party in determining who leads the party, as the ‘coups’ to oust both Charles Kennedy and then Ming Campbell underline.

The influence of Liberal Democrat MPs and peers in shaping party policy has clearly grown as the size of the parliamentary party has expanded – in part because of the staffing and other resources which MPs, in particular, have access to. This tendency for Liberal Democrat parliamentarians to exercise power far beyond that ascribed to them in the party’s constitution has almost certainly been strengthened since the Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government with the Conservatives in May 2010. Even the party’s [‘triple-lock mechanism’](#), designed to provide members with the power of veto over significant changes of strategic direction, is perhaps best understood as a case of party members following the lead of the parliamentary party.

## Conservatives

Of the three main parties, the Conservative Party grants least influence to members in the formulation of policy. As [Bale](#) notes, the party leader dominates the Conservative Party and, in opposition in particular, the party operates as ‘an essentially top-down organization’. Indeed, Bale portrays the Conservative Party’s vesting of power and autonomy in its leader as almost the polar opposite of the Labour Party’s model of organisation, while noting that with this power comes very clear personal responsibility; compared to Labour, the Conservative Party tends to be ruthlessly effective in removing leaders who do not deliver. Nonetheless, disquiet within the Conservative Party is not always restricted to concerns about how a leader is performing. Clear tensions emerged between constituency parties and the parliamentary party after the Conservatives’ 1997 election defeat and the, admittedly ‘tiny’, Charter Movement within the party began to push for greater internal democracy.

These dynamics were a significant, but by no means the only, factor in William Hague [promising delegates](#) at the 1997 party conference that the ‘party is going to involve its members more than ever before’. As well as the introduction of one member one vote elections in the final round of leadership contests, Hague’s reforms included the use of regular ballots of the membership to consult on policy development (see the case study below) and the introduction of new policy forums. However, these changes were clearly not a response to member demands alone, and it would be naïve to assume either that the measures significantly empowered members, or that they were ever intended to. While designed to assuage disquiet among constituency parties and the party membership at large, the wider package of reforms introduced by Hague are [widely recognised](#) to have been motivated by a desire to modernise and centralise the party. As [Bale](#) notes, ‘the reforms also granted unprecedented rights to the centre [...] to intervene in the affairs of associations deemed to be failing to meet specified “minimum criteria” on membership, fund-raising and campaigning’. In a similar vein, [Driver](#) finds that neither Hague’s policy forums nor the later specialist groups appointed to develop policy under David Cameron have undermined the ‘firm grip’ of the party leadership on the determination of party policy.

### **Case study: Consulting Conservative Party members on policy**

*The Conservative Party has never granted its members any real influence over policy, which has generally been the preserve of senior party figures (albeit with significant influence from leading right-of-centre think-tanks in recent decades). However, following William Hague’s elevation to the leadership in 1997, the Conservative Party began to consult its membership on policy via periodic membership ballots. In contrast to the use of OMOV to select a party leader, introduced as part of the same package of reforms, these ballots asked members to endorse anything from a set of principles to a single policy position or an entire draft manifesto. In total, five such ballots took place after 1997, beginning with the October 1997 vote to endorse the principles outlined by Hague following his*

election as leader under the previous system (in which only Conservative MPs had been able to vote). Further ballots followed in February 1998 on Hague's proposed party reforms (entitled *Fresh Future*) and, in October 1998, on the specific issue of the party's position on EU membership.

Subject	Date	Total votes	Yes	No
Endorsement of principles of Hague's leadership	October 1997	176,314	142,299 (80.7%)	34,092 (19.3%)
Endorsement of Fresh Future proposals	February 1998	114,590	110,165 (96.1%)	4,425 (3.9%)
Approving Hague's policy of ruling out UK membership of a single currency in this parliament and the next	October 1998	207,050	175,558 (84.8%)	31,492 (5.2%)
Endorsement of <i>Believing in Britain</i> (draft manifesto)	October 2000	50,499	49,932 (98.8%)	676 (1.2%)
Endorsement of <i>Built to Last</i> (statement of aims and values)	September 2006	65,646	60,859 (92.7%)	4,787 (7.3%)

Sources: Lees-Marshment and Quavle (2001); ConservativeHome (2006).

Relatively high levels of participation in these first three ballots, and the large majorities in support of the central party in each instance, provided a sense of legitimacy for Hague's leadership. However, the fourth ballot in October 2000, in which members were asked to endorse the draft manifesto, *Believing in Britain*, saw a sharp drop in the number of ballots returned to just over 50,000, representing a 'turnout' of around 16 per cent. Moreover, subsequent party leaders were less enthusiastic than Hague about the use of membership ballots on matters of policy. There were no such ballots under Iain Duncan-Smith or Michael Howard and the only time the membership has been balloted by David Cameron was on his *Built to Last* statement of aims and values in September 2006. As [Bale](#) notes, this last membership ballot proved to be something of a 'damp squib', with only a quarter of the membership participating. Of possibly greater concern, however, was that the number of ballot papers issued (247,000) seriously undermined the party's earlier claims that membership levels had surged under Cameron.

The post is based on extracts from the 2012 audit of UK democracy. For further discussion see section 2.2.3 [Parties as membership organisations](#).

**[Stuart Wilks-Heeg](#), [Andrew Blick](#), and [Stephen Crone](#) are the authors of the 2012 Democratic Audit report.**

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