

A long way from equidistance: Lib Dem Voting in Parliament, 1997-2007

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We have been publishing regular updates on the Lib Dems voting for several years now, and have tracked a remarkable change in the party's behaviour. Having previously been more likely to vote with the Government than against it at the beginning of the Blair Premiership, leading to accusations that the party was in bed with the government, the Lib Dems then transformed into a *bona fide* party of Opposition. Evidence from the most recent sessions reveals that that transformation has continued apace.

How Lib Dems vote

The data in this paper cover the ten parliamentary sessions from Labour's election in May 1997 to the end of the Tony Blair's final session as Prime Minister. During this period there were some 3089 divisions (votes) in the House of Commons. Of these, Lib Dem MPs were given free votes on 378 occasions, and there were 72 occasions when the Lib Dem position was to abstain. That leaves 2639 votes for analysis.

Table one shows the way the party's MPs voted in every whipped vote in the Commons over the last decade.

1. Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes, 1997-2007

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	58	2	1364	52	1422	54
<i>Against Cons</i>	848	32	369	14	1217	46
<i>Total</i>	906	34	1733	66	2639	100

Overall, then, the Lib Dems voted with Labour on 34% of whipped votes, and against Labour on 66%. They thus voted against the Government almost twice as often as they voted with Labour. Not all of the votes to see the party oppose Labour automatically saw them vote with the Conservatives, however: they voted against both major parties in 14% of divisions. There were also 2% of votes which saw all three parties voting in the same lobby.

However, these overall totals mask striking trends in the way the Lib Dem voting patterns have changed. The Lib Dems started the Blair decade being largely supportive of the Labour Government, especially much of the constitutional reform agenda implemented during the first Blair term. By the end of the 1997 Parliament as a whole, they had supported the Government 50% of the time, and opposed it 50% of the time. Indeed, the split was remarkably even: they voted with Labour on 557 occasions, but against Labour on 556 occasions. In the course of the 2001

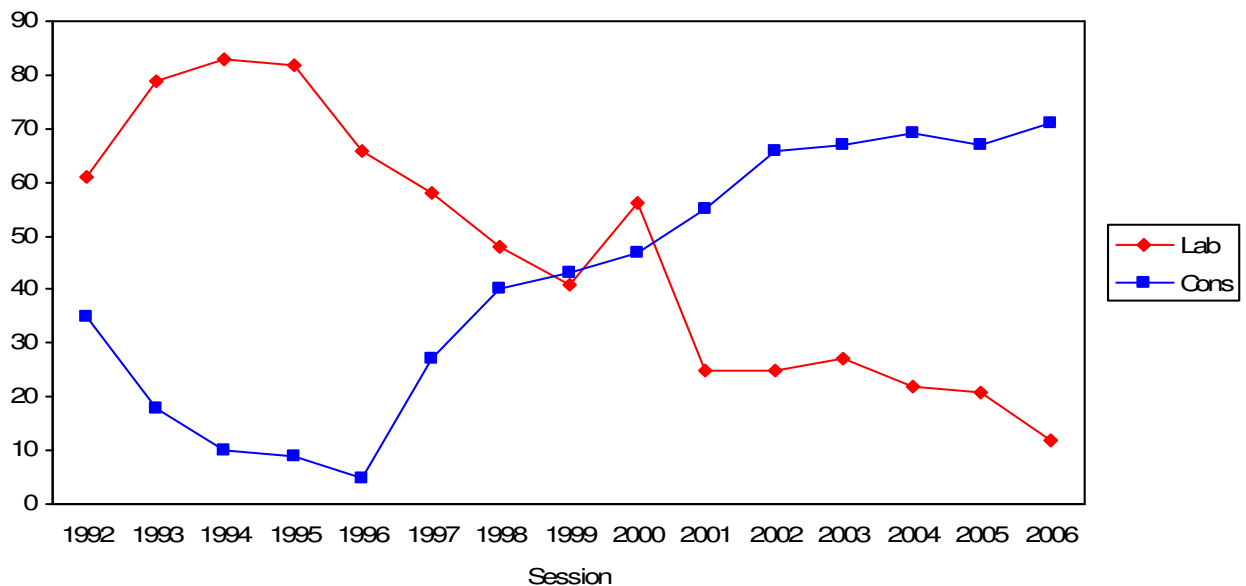
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Parliament, the Lib Dems voted only 25 per cent of the time with Labour, and 75 per cent against. The first two sessions of the present Parliament (2005-07) have seen the Lib Dems vote with Labour just 18% of the time, and against it 82 per cent of the time.

As Figure 1 shows, the Lib Dem's tendency to vote with the Conservatives has also been growing steadily, almost year-on-year: from 27 per cent in the first session of the 1997 Parliament, to 40 per cent in the second, 44 per cent in the third, 47 per cent in the fourth, to 55 per cent in the first session of the 2001 Parliament, to 66 per cent in the second session, reaching 67 per cent in the third, and 69 by the final session. By the end of the 2001 Parliament, Liberal Democrat MPs were more than twice as likely to vote with the Conservatives as they had been at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament.

The figures for the session just finished (2006-7) showed hostility to Labour at a new high, with the party voting with Labour in just 12% of divisions, and with the Conservatives in 71% of votes.

Fig 1. Lib Dem voting, in the House of Commons, 1992-2007

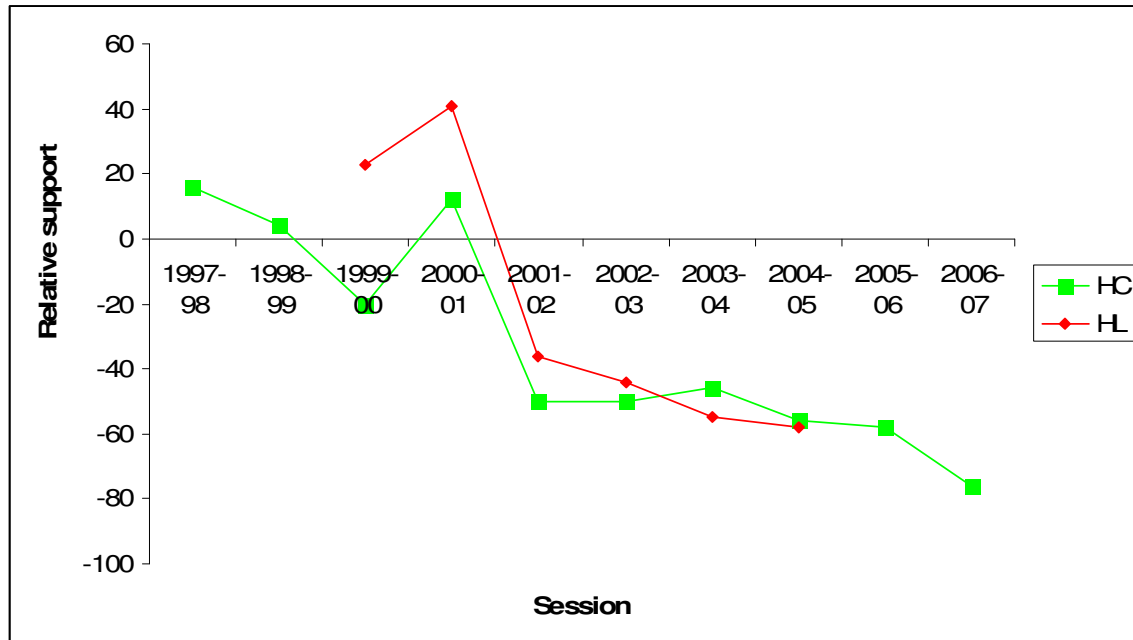


The transformation is even more dramatic if we trace Lib Dem voting with Labour (and also with the Conservatives) back to 1992, as the figure does. The party's relationship with Labour is thus now similar to that which it enjoyed with the Conservatives in the mid-1990s and vice versa.

A similar transformation has been going on in the House of Lords, where the Liberal Democrats are now effectively the swing voters, determining whether the Government win or lose most votes. Figure 2 shows the relative support levels of support displayed for the Government in votes in the Commons and the Lords,

defined simply as the % of divisions in which the Liberal Democrats support the government minus the % of divisions in which they oppose the Government. The data for the Lords is for a smaller time period and is calculated in a slightly different way, but the similarities in the *direction* of the Lib Dems' position in both Houses is striking.¹ As the decade progressed, so the party became much more likely to vote against the Government.

Fig 2. Relative support of Lib Dems for Government, in Commons and Lords, 1997-2007



A similar pattern is revealed if we examine the waning level of Liberal Democrat support for Government legislation at Second Reading (the vote on the principle of the bill) and/or Third Reading (the vote on the bill as finally constituted).² As Table 2 (below) shows, the Liberal Democrats supported 54% of the Government's programme in principle, and opposed 46%. But again, these overall figures mask some important changes over the last ten years. During the 1997 Parliament, the Lib Dems backed Labour in 68% of such votes. By the end of the 2001 Parliament, that support fell to 48%. In the first two sessions of this Parliament, the figure was just 21%, and during the whole of the 2006-07 session, the Liberal Democrats only

¹ The data for the Lords are taken from Meg Russell and Maria Sciara, 'Why Does the Government Get Defeated in the House of Lords? The Lords, the Party System and British Politics', *British Politics*, 2, 2007, p. 315. Their data are from those votes on which the government issues a whip, whereas the data for the Commons are for votes on which the Liberal Democrats whip, and their data also have a third category of 'abstain or unclear'. In each case, therefore, the utilised data are the percentage of votes on which the party votes and where its position is clearly defined, making them broadly comparable.

² We include reasoned amendments.

supported one piece of Government legislation at Second or Third Reading (voting for the Second Reading of the Greater London Authority Bill), voting against the principle of the government's legislation in 94% of the relevant votes.

2. Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes, Second or Third Reading, 1997-2007

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	19	6	106	34	125	41
<i>Against Cons</i>	148	48	35	11	183	59
<i>Total</i>	167	54	141	46	308	100

And something almost identical has happened when it comes to votes on the detail of Government legislation – at Committee stage (on the Floor of the House), Report and Lords amendment stages. Overall (see Table 3), the party has voted with the Government only 30 per cent of the time, and against it 70 per cent of the time – thus being more critical when it comes to votes on detail than on the principle of legislation. But there has been a dramatic fall-off in support for the Government since 1997. In the 1997 Parliament, the Lib Dems supported the fine print of Government legislation 48% of the time; by the end of the 2001 Parliament, that figure had declined to just 19%. The figure for the first two sessions of this parliament was 17%, and for the last session just a mere 8%.

3. Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes, Detail, 1997-2007

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	11	1	681	54	692	55
<i>Against Cons</i>	364	29	202	16	566	45
<i>Total</i>	375	30	883	70	1258	100

Conclusion

The transformation of the Liberal Democrats over the last decade can be summed up easily: the party was more hostile to Labour under Ming Campbell than it had been under Charles Kennedy, and it was more hostile to Labour under Charles Kennedy than it had been under Paddy Ashdown. It is not necessarily that each leader was the cause of this transformation – in each case the trend was occurring before the change in leadership – but the outcome has been clear. Nick Clegg takes over the party's leadership at a time when the party is closer to the Conservatives and more hostile to Labour than it has been for at least fifteen years. Indeed, it would be difficult for the Lib Dems to be much more hostile to Labour than they are at present.

Some Liberal Democrat MPs complain that this is an unfair way of looking at their behaviour. Because the practices and procedures of the Commons make it difficult for them to map out an independent policy position, in most votes they are forced into making a tough choice between Labour and the Conservatives. And just

because on one vote they might vote with the Conservatives against the Government that does not necessarily mean that they agree with them. It might just be that on that individual vote they disagree with the Conservatives less than with Labour. Alternatively, on some votes they may share a division lobby with the Conservatives in opposition to a government proposal, but the grounds for their opposition may be different.

But given that the Party does have to make that binary choice, over a mass of votes – and here we are examining more than 3000 – we can still draw some meaning from their behaviour. We may prefer to travel in a chauffeured car, but reality bites, and so we're forced to use trains and buses. And if in one year we travelled by train 60% and by bus 40% of the time and in another year we travelled by bus 90% of the time and train just 10%, no one would doubt that there had been a change in our behaviour. That is exactly the magnitude of the change to have come over the Lib Dems in recent years.

Liberal Democrats might also argue that what has changed is not their stance, but the positions of the other parties. In particular, they would argue that their support for Labour in the early years of the Blair administration was a result of the government pursuing many traditional Lib Dem policies – especially on the constitution – and that what has happened since has been the result of Labour moving onto ground the Lib Dems find less congenial. This maybe a fair observation (although to hold to it as an explanation of all of the transformation you have to believe that Labour have become a little bit worse almost year-on-year), but it does not affect the position that the party currently finds itself in, in terms of the possible relations between the two parties. It seems a long way away from any stance of equidistance, a principle Nick Clegg claims to support.