

An update on Lib Dem voting in the House of Commons

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Analysis of the last session's voting data shows that out of the 284 Commons whipped votes in which Lib Dem MPs participated, the party's MPs voted against the Government in 208 (73 per cent). They voted with the Government in just 76 divisions (27 per cent).[†]

This pattern of voting is yet further confirmation of behaviour that has now been clear in the Commons for a number of years. Having previously been more likely to vote with the Government than against it, the Lib Dems are now a *bona fide* party of Opposition.

For much of the 1997 Parliament one of the standard complaints about the Lib Dems – from the Conservatives, the media, and even some Liberal Democrats – was that the Party had become a mere adjunct of Labour, ever willing to do the Government's bidding. But the Lib Dems are now more likely to vote with the Conservatives than they ever were with Labour during the 1997 Parliament. If the complaint used to be that the Lib Dems were Labour clones, then those days are over. They are now much closer to Conservatives in their voting than to Labour.

The party's tendency to vote with the Conservatives has been growing steadily 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 54 per cent in the first session of this Parliament, to 66 per cent in the second session, and reaching 67 per cent now. Liberal Democrat MPs are now more than twice as likely to vote with the Conservatives as they were at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament.

Track the Lib Dems' voting back into the 1992 Parliament – when John Major was in Government – and the change in behaviour becomes even more marked. Then (as the Figure below shows), they were practically indistinguishable from Labour. In some years in the early 1990s, they voted with the Conservatives in just one vote in every ten. Following the 1997 election, they became slightly less favourable towards Labour. And since 2001 they have been – for the first time in a decade – regularly more likely to side with the Conservatives than with Labour.

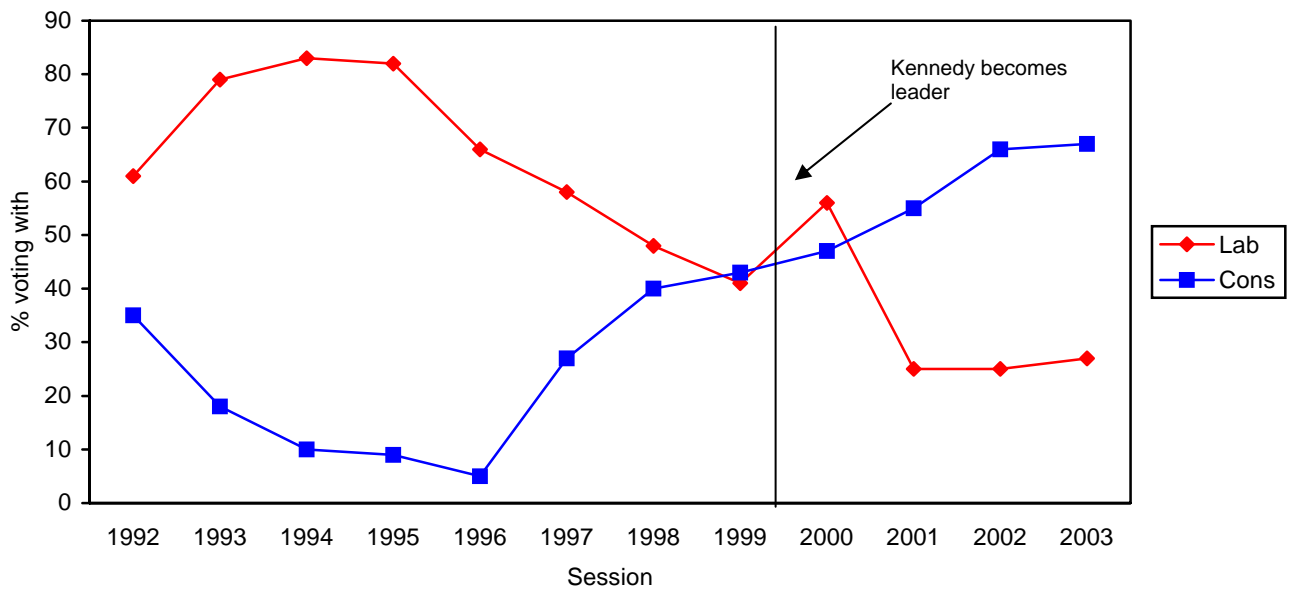
Lib Dems often complain that this is an unfair way of looking at their behaviour. Because the practices and procedures of the Commons make it difficult for them to map out an independent policy position of their own, in most votes they are forced into making a binary choice between Labour and the Conservatives. And just because on one vote they might vote with the Conservatives against the Government that does not necessarily mean that they agree with the Conservatives. It might be just that on that individual vote they disagree with

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† There were also 53 Lib Dem free votes, and three occasions when the Lib Dem frontbench line was to abstain.

the Conservatives less than they do with Labour. But given that the Party does have to make that binary choice, over a mass of votes we can still draw meaning from their behaviour. We may prefer to travel by luxury jet, but life's a bitch, and so we're forced to use trains and buses. And if in one year we travelled by train 80 per cent of the time and by bus 20 per cent of the time; but in another year we travelled by bus 70 per cent of the time and by train just 30 per cent of the time, no one would doubt that there had been a change in our behaviour. And that's exactly the magnitude of the change to have come over the Lib Dems in recent years.

Liberal Democrat Voting in the House of Commons, 1992-2004



These overall figures continue to mask some differences between the different types of votes. The Lib Dems are more supportive of the Government over the principle of legislation than over its details – although even here, there has been a noticeable drop in their levels of support. The third session saw the Lib Dems back the Government in 53 per cent of votes on the principle of government legislation (voting with them on either Second or Third Reading).[†] Where they really get stuck in, though, is over the fine print – voting against Labour in more than four out of every five votes on the detail of Government legislation.

[†] This excludes the Second and Third Reading of the Hunting Bill, which were Lib Dem free votes.