

Liberal Democrat leadership performance

IN THE SUMMER 2014 edition of the *Journal of Liberal History* (issue 83), a special issue on the first twenty-five years of the Liberal Democrats, we included an article on ‘Liberal Democrat leadership’ by Duncan Brack. The article included a table comparing the performance of the four Liberal Democrat leaders until 2014 in terms of their personal ratings and party ratings in the opinion polls, performance in general, European and local elections and numbers of party members, at the beginning and end of their leaderships.

Although these statistics of course ignore the political context of the leader’s period in office, and can mask large swings within the period – and other, non-quantitative, measures of a leader’s performance may be just as, if not more, important – these figures do have value in judging the effectiveness of any given leader.

We have had, of course, to update this table several times over the last five years, and therefore present here the comparative statistics for the eight leaders of the Liberal Democrats up to the election of Ed Davey in August 2020; for these purposes, we are counting the interim leadership of Ed Davey and the two party presidents who held office during this period, Sal Brinton and Mark Pack, as a discrete ‘leadership’.

Here’s hoping we don’t need to update the table again for several more years!

Notes and sources

- a Ipsos-MORI series on ‘satisfaction with party leaders’. Ratings are given for the nearest available date to the leader’s election and resignation. Ipsos-MORI did not poll this question for Ed Davey’s interim leadership
- b After Jo Swinson’s defeat in the 2019 general election – and therefore automatic resignation as leader – the interim leadership was held jointly by the deputy leader of the parliamentary party in the Commons (Ed Davey) and the party president (Baroness Brinton until 31 December 2019, Mark Pack from 1 January 2020).
- c Ipsos-MORI series on ‘voting intention trends’. Where resignation immediately followed an election, the election result is given.
- d Willie Rennie was elected in the Dunfermline & West Fife by-election during the 2006 leadership election.
- e In December 2018 Stephen Lloyd, one of the 12 Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2017, resigned the whip to sit as an independent. In June 2019 Chuka Umunna MP joined the party.
- f Until 2019: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, Elections Centre, Plymouth University. From 2019: Open Council Data UK (<http://opencouncildata.co.uk>); because of errors in the source data, entry date differences, etc., figures should be accurate to ± 10 . For voting figures, years in which local elections coincided with general elections are excluded.
- g The total number of councillors has been falling since the mid 1990s, as unitary authorities have replaced district councils in some areas; from 1994 to 2013, for example, the total number of councillors fell by about 15 per cent.
- h The postponement of local elections and by-elections due to the coronavirus pandemic means that the bulk of the fall from the previous figure is probably due to resignations and deaths leaving unfilled vacancies.
- h Before 2015: Mark Pack. ‘Liberal Democrat membership figures’, <https://www.markpack.org.uk/143767/liberal-democrat-membership-figures/>; 2015 on: Liberal Democrat HQ.
- i Ashdown, Farron and Cable announced their intention to resign in advance, and stood down on the election of their successor; the membership figures for the end of their period in office and the start of their successor’s are therefore identical. Kennedy, Campbell and Clegg all resigned with immediate effect; the exact membership figures are not available at the point of Kennedy’s and Campbell’s resignations, so figures given here are approximate. While we know that membership increased sharply after Clegg’s resignation, in the run-up to the 2015 leadership election, it is not known whether this happened after Kennedy’s resignation in 2006 or Campbell’s in 2007.

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Leadership performance						
	Ashdown (1988–99)		Kennedy (1999–2006)		Campbell (2006–07)	
<i>Personal ratings (net score satisfied minus dissatisfied (per cent) and date)^a</i>						
When elected	-4	Aug 1988	+11	Aug 1999	+5	Mar 2006
Highest during leadership	+58	May 1997	+42	June 2001	+6	May 2006
Lowest during leadership	-24	July 1989	+8	June 2004	-13	May 2007
When stood down	+39	July 1999	+20	Aug 2005	-11	Sept 2007
Range (highest – lowest)	82		34		19	
<i>Party poll ratings (per cent and date)^c</i>						
When elected	8	July 1988	17	Aug 1999	19	Mar 2006
Highest during leadership	28	July 1993	26	Dec 2004, May 2005	25	Apr 2006
Lowest during leadership	4	June – Aug, Nov 1989	11	Oct 99, July 00, Jan, May 01	11	Oct 2007
When stood down	17	Aug 1999	15	Jan 2006	11	Oct 2007
<i>Westminster election performance: Liberal Democrat MPs and vote (%)</i>						
MPs when elected	19		46		63 ^d	
MPs when stood down	46		62		63	
Highest election vote (% , date)	17.8	1992	22.0	2005	n/a	
Lowest election vote (% , date)	16.8	1997	18.3	2001	n/a	
<i>European election performance: Liberal Democrat MEPs and vote (%)</i>						
MEPs when elected	0		10		12	
MEPs when stood down	10		12		12	
Highest election vote (% , date)	16.7	1994	14.9	2004	n/a	
Lowest election vote (% , date)	6.4	1989	n/a		n/a	
<i>Local election performance: councillors and vote^{f,g}</i>						
Councillors when elected	3,640		4,485		4,743	
Councillors when stood down	4,485		4,743		4,420	
Highest election vote (% , date)	27	1994	27	2003, 2004	25	2006
Lowest election vote (% , date)	17	1990	25	2002	24	2007
<i>Party membership^{i,j}</i>						
Membership when elected	80,104		82,827		72,064	
Membership when stood down	82,827		~72,000		~64,000	
Change (per cent)	+3		-13		-11	

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<i>Clegg (2007–15)</i>		<i>Farron (2015–17)</i>		<i>Cable (2017–19)</i>		<i>Swinson (2019)</i>		<i>Davey / Brinton / Pack (2019–20)^b</i>	
-3	Jan 2008	-7	Sept 2015	-1	Sept 2017	0	July 2019	n/a	
+53	Apr 2010	-1	Dec 2016	-1	Sept 2017	0	July 2019	n/a	
-45	Oct 2012, Sept 2014	-19	May 2017	-19	Oct 2018	-22	Dec 2019	n/a	
-21	April 2015	-19	May 2017	-7	June 2019	-22	Dec 2019	n/a	
98		18		18		22		n/a	
14	Dec 2007	10	Sept 2015	9	July 2017	20	July 2019	12	Dec 2019
32	Apr 2010	14	Dec 2016	22	June 2019	23	Sept 2019	12	Dec 2019
6	Feb 2015	6	Feb, Apr, Sept 2016	6	Mar 2018	12	Dec 2019	6	Aug 2020
8	May 2015	7	June 2017	20	July 2019	12	Dec 2019	6	Aug 2020
63		8		12		12		11	
8		12		12 ^e		11		11	
23.0	2010	7.4	2017	n/a		11.5	2019	n/a	
7.9	2015	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	
12		1		1		16		16	
1		1		16		16		n/a	
13.7	2009	n/a		19.6	2019	n/a		n/a	
6.6	2014	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	
4,420		1,810		1,803		2,513		2,520	
1,810		1,803		2,513		2,520		2,495 ^h	
25	2009	18	2017	17	2019	n/a		n/a	
11	2014	15	2016	14	2018	n/a		n/a	
64,728		60,215		104,925		110,960		127,577	
44,568		104,925		110,960		127,577		116,575	
-31		+74		+6		+15		-9	