

Survey

Duncan Brack reports the results of a survey of leading Liberal Democrats' political influences.

What Influences Liberal Democrats?

IN 1906 THE Liberal journalist W.T. Stead wrote to the newly elected Labour MPs to discover the influence of books and religious affiliations on their political beliefs. His findings, that the Bible ranked second behind the works of John Ruskin, while only two of the 45 MPs who replied had read Marx, was the basis of the frequently repeated aphorism that the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marx.

In 1962, 1975 and 1994 *New Society*/*New Statesman & Society* repeated the exercise with both Labour and Conservative MPs, widening the questions to include the influence of other forms of art or entertainment and of contemporary figures and events, and the influence of intellectuals on the MP's party. The last survey, in 1994, showed from Labour respondents a decline in the influence of the classic intellectuals of the left and a resurgence of interest in older forms of ethical socialism and in the Bible. Conservatives revealed a lower level of interest in books and authors and a tendency to cite influences from within their own ranks and domestic experiences.

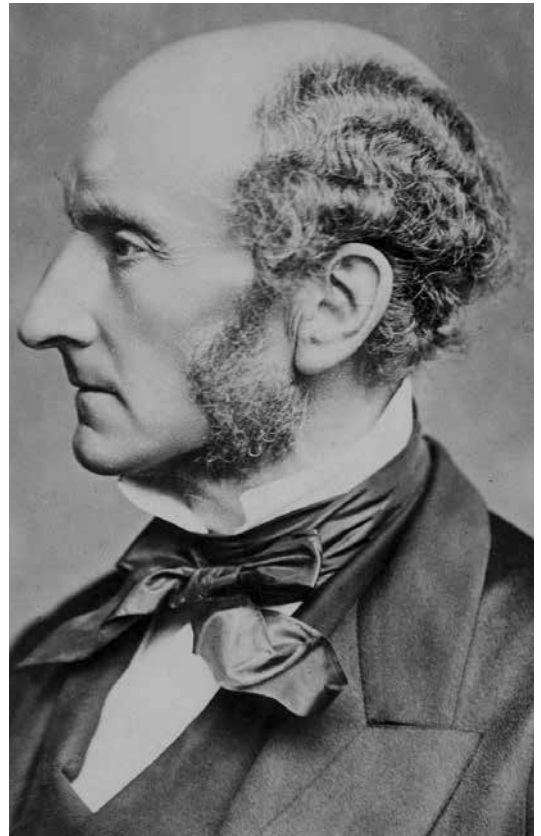
The 1995 survey

Liberal Democrat MPs were included in the 1994 survey, but too few responded to make an analysis worthwhile – hardly surprising,

out of a total then of only 23. So, in 1995, with permission from the *New Statesman*, the Liberal Democrat History Group repeated the survey, widening the sample to include Liberal Democrat MEPs, peers and members of the Federal Executive and Federal Policy Committee, the party organisation's top two decision-making bodies. This gave a total sample size of 117, of whom 47 responded (40 per cent). The analysis of responses, with comparisons to those from Labour and Conservatives, was published in issue 8 of the *Journal of Liberal History* (autumn 1995), which can be found on our website.

In summary, our survey found that Liberal Democrats were almost as likely as Labour MPs, and more so than Conservatives, to derive political influences from books or authors, but their selection was strikingly different. Over a third mentioned the greatest of the Victorian Liberal philosophers, John Stuart Mill, usually for his essay *On Liberty*. Other Liberal thinkers, including L.T. Hobhouse and John Maynard Keynes, also featured, as did green economists such as E.F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*.

Although the Bible ranked second equal in Liberal Democrats' influential books, religion had by and large not been a major influence. Only a minority of respondents – 40 per cent, compared to 48 per cent for Labour and



Influential figure: Paddy Ashdown. Influential author: John Stuart Mill.

65 per cent for the Conservatives – believed that religion had had a positive impact on their political beliefs, while 44 per cent professed a religious denomination (38 per cent for Labour, 54 per cent for Conservatives).

Liberal Democrats also showed themselves distinct from the other two parties in their choice of influential figures and events. In common with Conservatives and Labour, the contemporary personalities of greatest influence were mostly of the same political faith – Jo Grimond (mentioned by a massive 45 per cent of respondents, underlining his key role in the postwar Liberal revival), and the architects of the Liberal-SDP Alliance, David Steel and Roy Jenkins. The age range of the Lib Dem sample was revealed in the personal memories of some of them of John Maynard Keynes and David Lloyd George!

Lib Dems' internationalist outlook was revealed in their choice of key events that had influenced their political beliefs. Five out of the top six cited – of which the top three were Suez (17 per cent), the Second World War (13 per cent) and British entry into Europe (11 per cent) – were all to do with events overseas or British foreign policy. Others cited by more than one respondent included more domestic events, but the personal experiences quoted by Labour and Conservative MPs (e.g. 'upbringing', mentioned by 14 per cent of Labour) were absent.

The 2025 survey

As far as we are aware, the *New Statesman* has not repeated its survey since 1994. Nevertheless, we decided that a reprise, after a

thirty-year gap, could be interesting and of potential use to students of Liberal history. So between June and August this year we invited Liberal Democrat MPs, peers, members of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Greater London Assembly, and members of the party's Federal Board (the replacement for the Federal Executive) and Federal Policy Committee to complete the survey. A total of 50 responded, out of a total target audience of 188 (27 per cent). Unsurprisingly, the response rate was greatest amongst federal committee members, and lowest amongst elected politicians (just as in 1995). The questions we asked were mainly the same as in the earlier survey, with the addition of one on digital or social media.

Books, journals and authors

The responses to the questions on the influences of books, authors and journals displayed a high degree of consistency with the 1995 survey. Almost exactly the same proportion of respondents believed that the reading of books had played a significant part in influencing their political beliefs and actions – 82 per cent, against 83 per cent in 1995.

The main authors featuring in the responses also had some similarities – see Table 1. While a huge number – well over a hundred – were mentioned, John Stuart Mill again topped the list (mostly for *On Liberty*, but one respondent mentioned *Utilitarianism*). Hobhouse, Keynes, Harper Lee, Locke, Orwell, Popper, Rawls, Bertrand Russell,

Table 1 Which authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?			
1995		2025	
John Stuart Mill	34%	John Stuart Mill	28%
The Bible	13%	George Orwell	12%
John Maynard Keynes	13%	John Locke	10%
E. F. Schumacher	13%	Paddy Ashdown	8%
George Orwell	11%	Harper Lee	8%
Tom Paine	11%	Robert Caro	6%
Karl Marx	9%	Nick Clegg	6%
Robert Tressell	9%	Thomas Hobbes	6%
L. T. Hobhouse	6%	John Rawls	6%
John Locke	6%	Jean-Jacques Rousseau	6%
Karl Popper	6%	John Steinbeck	6%
Bertrand Russell	6%		
Others listed by more than one respondent: Isaiah Berlin, Bruno Bettelheim, Noam Chomsky, Anthony Crosland, Ralf Dahrendorf, J. K. Galbraith, William Gladstone, Alexander Hamilton, Georg Hegel, Harper Lee, David Lloyd George, John Rawls, James Robertson, R. H. Tawney, Leo Tolstoy, Donald Wade		Others listed by more than one respondent: Francis Fukuyama, L. T. Hobhouse, Aldous Huxley, Roy Jenkins, John Maynard Keynes, Niccolo Machiavelli, Alan Paton, Karl Popper, Bertrand Russell, E. F. Schumacher, Robert Tressell	

Schumacher and Tressell all featured in both lists – all authors who could be classified as liberal or, at least, progressive, in their views. (Though note that the table below lists authors who gained just two or more responses, so is subject to a high degree of individual variation.)

Many of these are also fairly traditional authors, in the sense that they are likely to have been read by our respondents at school or university. One notable omission this time was the Bible, mentioned by only one respondent in 2025. The two main new authors, Paddy Ashdown and Nick Clegg, had of course not written many, or any books, in 1995. There were slightly fewer mentions of green authors, with the exception of Schumacher, though several were included in the long list.

In common with the 1995 survey, respondents identified very few books published in the last five years as at all influential. In fact, only two gained more than one response: Ian Dunt's *How to be a Liberal* and Rory Stewart's *Politics on the Edge*.

Journals, digital and social media, arts and entertainment

Turning to other forms of media, again there was a degree of consistency with the 1995 results. The two main journals or magazines mentioned as being read regularly, *The Economist* and *New Statesman*, were the same as in the earlier survey, while *Prospect* and, pleasingly, the *Journal of Liberal History*, were the only two others to be mentioned by more than two respondents.

Again similarly to 1995, most respondents felt that arts or entertainment had not had a major impact on their political beliefs. For the minority that felt it had, theatre was mentioned by 18 per cent, and cinema/film by 12 per cent. This was similar to the 1995 response, though in both cases the figures were then slightly higher.

Most respondents (56 per cent) felt that digital or social media, including podcasts, had not influenced their political beliefs, while 36 per cent felt it had. Several shared views such as: 'Not fundamentally; this tends to be somewhere I go for news and current affairs'; and 'I find digital and social media tends to confirm my beliefs rather than challenge them!' The age range of our respondents is likely to have affected these responses; for most people, political beliefs are shaped by their early experiences and inputs, and many of our respondents were too old for digital or social media to have existed when they were young.

For those who did feel digital media had had an impact, one observed that: 'None have affected my fundamental political beliefs, but many have helped shape my contemporary application of political philosophy and thought'. More emphatically, another stated that 'Social media has had a profound impact upon my political perspectives over the last fifteen years. I doubt I would have become politically active without it.' The only podcast to be mentioned by more than one respondent was Alastair Campbell's and Rory Stewart's 'The Rest is Politics', while the only main digital sources of news or comment mentioned by more than two respondents were *Politico*, *Lib Dem Voice* and Sam Freedman's 'Comment is Freed' blog.

Influential figures

We broke down the original survey question about which figures had influenced respondents' beliefs into historical individuals – those who had died or ceased to be active before the respondent was born – and contemporary figures. This was arguably not worth it, however, as of course some figures were contemporaries of our older respondents while at the same time being historical individuals to the younger ones! Table 2 combines the two sets of responses and compares them with

Table 2 In the early stages of your political life did any particular historical/contemporary figures(s) stand out as an influence on you?			
1995		2025	
Jo Grimond	45%	Paddy Ashdown	26%
Hugh Gaitskell	11%	Shirley Williams	20%
Roy Jenkins	11%	David Lloyd George	20%
David Steel	9%	None	18%
Harold Wilson *	9%	Nelson Mandela	12%
		David Steel	12%
		William Gladstone	10%
		John F. Kennedy	10%
		John Maynard Keynes	10%
		Margaret Thatcher **	10%
* 7% as negative influence		** all as negative influence	
Others listed by more than one respondent: Tony Benn, Jim Callaghan, Anthony Crosland, Michael Foot, Edward Heath, John F. Kennedy, John Maynard Keynes, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, Shirley Williams, none		Others listed by more than one respondent: Tony Blair, Nick Clegg, Winston Churchill, Tim Farron, Mahatma Gandhi, Jo Grimond, Vaclav Havel, Adolf Hitler, Simon Hughes, Roy Jenkins, Charles Kennedy, Martin Luther King, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Mo Mowlam, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jeremy Thorpe	

the 1995 survey (though since in 1995 the only question was about contemporary figures, the responses are not strictly comparable; more historical figures were allowable responses in 2025).

In common with the 1995 survey, the personalities of greatest influence are mostly of the same political faith: of the top eight individuals generating a positive response in 2025, six were Liberals or Liberal Democrats. However, a much more visible shift in generations is evident than in some of the earlier questions. Jo Grimond was mentioned by 45 per cent of respondents in 1995, but only 6 per cent in 2025, while Paddy Ashdown, still only two-thirds of the way through his leadership in 1995, now tops the responses in 2025. There

is also, however, considerable continuity: six out of the nine individuals listed in the 2025 responses in Table 2 also featured in at least two responses in 1995 (the exceptions being Ashdown, and Gladstone and Lloyd George, who were contemporaries of (almost) none of our respondents in 1995!).

One other marked change is the fading from the responses of leading Labour figures of the 1960s and 1970s (with the exception of those who joined the Liberal Democrats – Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams). Tony Benn, Anthony Crosland and Hugh Gaitskell were mentioned by just one respondent each, and Jim Callaghan, Michael Foot and Harold Wilson by none, all in contrast to 1995, when more of the individuals who had left Labour to

form the Social Democratic Party in 1981 were included amongst our respondents. Harold Wilson has now clearly been replaced as the main hate figure by Margaret Thatcher.

The question on the influence of intellectuals garnered almost precisely the same response as in 1995, when 74 per cent of respondents said yes, and 17 per cent no, to the question: 'Do you feel that intellectuals have made a significant contribution to the Liberal Democrats?' This year, 74 per cent said yes and 18 per cent no. One respondent believed that: 'we've struck a unique balance between pretty hard-nosed campaigning, political imperatives and thoughtful and well-researched policy development', though several who responded positively also commented that they thought the influence had been stronger in the past than the present (several respondents in 1995 thought the same). Some of the minority views were stridently expressed, however: 'No ... Politics is about making lives better and intellectuals seldom actually

contribute much to that process.' 'No. We are good at taking a rational evidence-based approach to individual problems, but are rather dismissive of intellectuals – unless they also deliver leaflets!'

Events

It is in our respondents' identification of the events that have most influenced them that the passage of time is most evident – see Table 3. The top two events in 1995 – the Suez adventure of 1956 and the Second World War – have now dropped out almost completely (one respondent mentioned Suez), while four of the top nine in 2025 – Brexit, the Iraq war, 9/11 and the Middle East war (dating this from the start of the second Intifada in 2000, which is probably justifiable) – had of course not taken place by 1995.

It is interesting, though, that another three of the top nine in 2025 – the Thatcher government, apartheid and the miners' strike – had all taken place by 1995 but did not

Table 3 What event(s) during your lifetime has had the greatest effect on your political beliefs?

1995		2025	
Suez	17%	Brexit	30%
Second World War	13%	Fall of Berlin Wall	20%
Entry into Europe	11%	Iraq war	14%
Assassination of JFK	6%	Entry into Europe	12%
Collapse of USSR	6%	Thatcher government	12%
No event	6%	Middle East conflict	8%
		Apartheid / South Africa	8%
		Miners' strike	8%
		9/11	8%
<i>Others listed by more than one respondent:</i> 1974 elections, advent of Thatcherism, the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, the foundation of the SDP, the depression of the 1930s, Vietnam		<i>Others listed by more than one respondent:</i> Blair government, Cuban missile crisis, climate change / Paris Agreement, election of Trump, financial crisis, Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition, 1997 election, none	

feature in that list. (Just to be clear, everyone who mentioned the Thatcher government specified that it was because of the damage it caused to society and communities.) As with the books people read, it seems likely that it is the events that take place during their formative years – childhood and early adulthood – that have the most lasting influences. Most of our respondents in 1995 had passed those stages of their lives by the time the Thatcher government, apartheid and the miners' strike had taken place. This is clearly not a complete explanation, however, as the top event in 2025 – Brexit – took place only nine years ago (or even more recently if one considers its lasting impacts as the 'event'); probably this event was so seismic in its impacts that it affected everyone regardless of their age.

While most of our respondents cited specific events, often taking place outside the UK, others were much more personal. One cited 'becoming a councillor'; another 'The realisation – finally – that I was a Liberal!'

Religion

In 1995 40 per cent of respondents believed that religion had had a significant positive impact on their political beliefs, while this year the figure had climbed slightly, to 50 per cent. Several observed that while they did not regard themselves as particularly religious now, religion during their upbringing had influenced their beliefs: 'I would not describe myself as someone of faith, but I do think the moral messages of the New Testament are often fundamentally Liberal'; 'Reading the Old Testament stories as a child set my moral compass, I hope'. Others expressed their belief more strongly: 'Yes: I'm a Liberal Anglican, brought up to believe I had to justify my life by what I did for others.'

A significant minority felt that religion had influenced their political beliefs in the opposite direction: 'For the most part I blame

religion for most of the hatred, wars and "othering" in the world.' Perhaps the most Liberal response was: 'Love God but dislike disciples!'

Conclusion

Given that almost none of our respondents this year were included in the 1995 survey (a tiny handful who were MPs or MEPs or peers then are peers now, but almost none of them responded), the results this year display a higher degree of consistency than I expected. In particular, the influence of books and figures, and the choice of books and figures, display some striking examples of continuity. The passage of time is clearer in the events that influenced respondents' political beliefs.

Such surveys cannot, of course, determine the direction of influence. Do people become Liberal Democrats after reading *On Liberty*? Or do they read *On Liberty* because they are Liberal Democrats? Did they feel dismayed by Brexit because they are Liberal Democrats, or did they become a Liberal Democrat after voting on the losing side in the referendum? (the jump in party membership after June 2016 suggests the latter was significant). What is the relative importance of books, figures and events – are some more significant than others? And – given that a number of respondents told me they thought none of the topics covered had proved influential for them – what did we miss from the survey? The influence of family, friends, education, workplace or local activists can all be important; and maybe there are other factors too.

Possibly these may be topics for future surveys, or interviews, but in the mean time I hope you find our survey results of interest, and revealing of at least some of the influences that have shaped Liberal Democrats' beliefs and political culture. ■

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