

Consultation Paper 163

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY



Spring Conference
YORK 2026

Background

This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of new Party policy in relation to the defence of Britain's liberal democracy. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the response generated and on the deliberations of the working group a full policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate.

The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Sarah Lewis. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party.

Comments on the paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to: Christian Moon, Policy Unit, Liberal Democrats, First Floor, 66 Buckingham Gate, London, SW1E 6AU, United Kingdom. Email: policy.consultations@libdems.org.uk

Comments should reach us as soon as possible and no later than 27 March 2026. Further copies of this paper can be found online at <https://www.libdems.org.uk/members/make-policy/policy-consultations>

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1 Representativeness

Background

1.1 The UK's current political system fails to be truly representative of the people in many ways. The First Past the Post (FPTP) system results in gross disproportion between the number of votes given to a party and the number of seats it wins. The 2024 General Election was the most disproportional in history. Labour won 63% of MPs with just 34% of the vote – and we have seen the chaos and instability that has caused. Millions of voters cast votes for candidates who didn't get elected in their constituency, and these votes ended up making no impact on the political balance in the Commons, leaving 57.8% of all voters unrepresented. 554 constituencies (85% of all seats) elected their representative on less than 50% of the vote share (this compares to 229 constituencies in 2019).

1.2 The increasing fragmentation of party politics in the UK is only likely to make these problems more severe in the future.

1.3 Parliament is also unrepresentative in terms of demographic groups as well as political parties. In 2024 only 40% of MPs were elected were women, and only about 90 were from minority ethnic groups (compared to 104 in a fully representative Parliament).

1.4 The 'winner takes all' aspect of elections under FPTP encourages an adversarial and polarising type of politics. Meanwhile the House of Lords remains entirely unelected, and political power remains highly centralised in Westminster and Whitehall. The power of the Prime Minister to call elections at a time of their choosing gives the incumbent party a clear tactical advantage.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Introducing proportional representation by the Single Transferable Vote for electing MPs, and local councillors in England.
- Scrapping the Conservatives' voter ID scheme.
- Reforming the House of Lords with a proper democratic mandate.
- Transferring greater powers away from Westminster and Whitehall, introducing a codified written constitution for a federal United Kingdom with strong voices for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and opposing a second Scottish independence referendum and independence.
- Enabling all UK citizens living abroad to vote for MPs in separate overseas constituencies, and to participate in UK referendums.
- Restoring to Parliament – instead of the Prime Minister alone – the power to call and set the date of an early general election.
- Bringing into force Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring political parties to publish candidate diversity data.

Questions:

Q1 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above?*

Q2 *How can we best make the argument for electoral reform?*

Q3 *How can the Party's commitment to better representation for overseas electors through their own dedicated constituencies be taken forward sooner rather than later?*

Q4 *Is there a role for Citizen's Assemblies within our democratic process? If so, are there any issues addressed by this Policy Working Group where the convening of a Citizen's Assembly might be of value?*

Q5 *Adversarial politics actively exposes alternative ideas to rigorous challenge but do we need greater emphasis on consensus-building, for instance in the formulation of longer-term plans and future strategy frameworks for our public services? If so, how might this be achieved?*

Q6 *Drawing on the experience of devolved administrations and the 2010 Coalition Government, are there any changes to the way Parliament operates which would facilitate cross-party cooperation with due weight given to alternative views and perspectives in the confrontation of major challenges and in the formation of stable governments in situations where no one party has an overall majority?*

Q7 *How closely should a reformed Upper Chamber exactly mirror the current role of the Lords? Are there any additional functions such as advocacy for the UK nations and English regions which it could usefully perform?*

Q8 *If a revising and scrutinising voice has greater resonance when it is democratically accountable, do we need any review, clarification or re-affirmation of the relationship between the two chambers?*

Q9 *How can we provide better representation to voters who believe that our democracy does not represent them? For example, should ballots spoiled out of protest and ballots spoiled by mistake be counted separately?*

Q10 *What other measures can be taken to improve representation of under-represented groups?*

2 Political Spending and Donations

Background

2.1 The 2024 General Election saw the highest amount of campaign spending ever – £94.5 million was spent by political parties in the year before the election according to the Electoral Commission. The higher the level of spending, the greater the advantage given to those with the deepest pockets. Given that most party fundraising comes not from large numbers of small donors but a small number of very large donors, the ability to fundraise does not necessarily reflect the overall degree of support a party enjoys in the electorate.

2.2 The last Conservative government increased the total campaign spending limit to £34.1 million, nearly double the previous cap. At the same time, they increased the level at which donations have to be individually reported to £11,180 for national parties and £2,230 for local campaigns. These changes clearly represented an attempt to give themselves an advantage over less well-funded opponents. Changes in the 2022 Elections Act also weakened the independence of the Electoral Commission.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Taking big money out of politics by restoring the previous campaign spending limits and capping donations to political parties.
- Working towards radical real-time transparency for political advertising, donations and spending, including an easily searchable public database of all online political adverts.
- Protecting and strengthening the independence of the Electoral Commission, following Conservative attempts to undermine it.

Questions:

Q11 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above?*

Q12 *What limits should there be on election spending? Should there be restrictions outside the current 'regulated period'? Is the balance between local and national limits right?*

Q13 *What is the proper role for state funding of political parties?*

Q14 *On what principle should we base a cap on donations?*

Q15 *Should we allow corporate donations of any kind? What about Trade Unions and unincorporated associations?*

Q16 *If we introduce a donation cap do we also need to tighten regulation around third party spending and related 'dark money' from non-party campaign groups?*

Q17 *Who should enforce electoral regulations? What should the sanctions be for making and receiving impermissible donations?*

Q18 *How should we regulate donations made by crypto currencies (used by authoritarian regimes for 'dark money' purposes) and how should the government improve its compliance regulations?*

Q19 *Do you believe the local police force is best suited to investigate these issues, or should a specialist force (either a central unit or a designated police force) be tasked with these investigations?*

3 Standards in Public Life

Background

3.1 There can be little doubt that one of the major factors driving the disenchantment and alienation of many people with democratic politics is the widespread perception that politicians are 'all the same' – meaning self-serving and putting their personal interest before the public interest. There has been a quite extraordinary succession of scandals in the last few years under both Conservative and Labour administrations.

3.2 It is a fundamental liberal principle that those in positions of power must be held to account. A restoration of standards in public life is essential if we are to restore trust in politics.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Holding Government Ministers to account for corruption and sleaze by enshrining the Ministerial Code in legislation.
- Making the role of the Adviser on Ministers' Interests truly independent by:
 - Empowering them to initiate their own investigations, determine breaches and publish their report.
 - Putting the role on a statutory basis and giving Parliament the power to appoint them.
- Ensuring that Ministers receive annual training to prevent sleaze.
- Establishing a rigorous, transparent and independent process to appoint significant public roles, involving a confirmatory vote by the relevant Parliamentary select committee.

- Bringing reporting standards for the List of Ministers' Interests in line with the House of Commons Register of Members' Interests, so that publication takes place more frequently.
- Strengthening and expanding the lobbying register.
- Ensuring that a record of all lobbying of Ministers via instant messages, emails, letters and phone calls is published as part of quarterly transparency releases.

Questions:

Q20 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above? What other policies about lobbying should the party develop? Should there be more oversight/regulation on APPG/lobbying consultancies?*

Q21 *Are there lessons that should be learnt from the scandalous appointment of Peter Mandelson as Ambassador to the US, for example of appropriate vetting procedures?*

Q22 *A low opinion of politicians and the political system is often cited as a cause of apathy and disaffection among some voters. Should the restoration of faith in politics and politicians be cited as a key objective of our party?*

4 Media and Democracy

Background

4.1 The quality of public debate has declined significantly in recent years, with growing polarisation, hostility and rejection of traditionally accepted norms of behaviour. This has especially been the case online, with incitements to violence, misinformation and harmful content spreading at an alarming rate.

4.2 It is not, however, only a problem online. Traditional news media has also undergone a decline in recent years, with local journalism diminishing, and trust in the quality of established news outlets also falling.

4.3 The education system in England has also failed to keep up with the pace of change, focusing on traditional materials rather than those that meet the challenges of the digital age. This especially affects older generations who did not grow up with the internet and are currently not offered any lifelong education in this area.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Mandating the provision of televised leaders' debates in general elections, based on rules produced by Ofcom.
- Requiring very large social media platforms to negotiate fair compensation to news providers whose content appears on their sites.
- Applying the same rules to online news outlets as traditional news providers.
- Funding local journalism and independent fact checkers with a levy on very large social media platforms.
- Implementing the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry in full and commissioning Leveson 2.

- Introducing life-long learning for all citizens about the digital public square and how to navigate it.

Questions:

Q23 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above (see also Policy Paper 145 Democracy and Public Debate for more detail)?*

Q24 *How can we improve reporting on campaign issues and parliamentary candidates that voters will directly vote for in a media landscape focused on national parties and leaders?*

Q25 *What requirements, if any, should there be in the next BBC Charter renewal in terms of voter education?*

Q26 *How can we make news outlets accountable for accurate reporting of information and fact checking of comments given by politicians in media interviews?*

Q27 *Should newspapers continue to be exempt from all spending controls, both national and constituency, at election times?*

Q28 *Should the UK government regulate news outlets which are largely based on social media platforms?*

Q29 *Should social media providers be obliged to show a prominent 'unverified content' border to all unverified content shown in the UK?*

Q30 *How should we raise levels of social media literacy? Other than improving our education curriculum, how can the UK government improve the awareness of the general public (e.g. advertising campaigns)?*

5 Foreign Interference

Background

5.1 Many of the problems identified in previous sections are not merely domestic to the UK but have international dimensions. In particular hostile foreign actors use both political funding and media and social media disinformation to manipulate political outcomes. The Intelligence and Security Committee's 2020 Russia Report concluded that British politics and the economy are targets, with evidence of widespread Russian interference, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and using Russian oligarchs to channel money and influence, with the government underestimating the threat. Securing the integrity of our democracy is therefore as important a part of national security as military defence.

5.2 Some of the other policies discussed elsewhere in this paper, such as tightening rules on campaign spending and donations caps, would help to mitigate the problems of foreign interference.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Pushing for a global convention or treaty to combat disinformation and electoral interference, supplemented by an annual conference and Global Counter-Disinformation Fund, to safeguard and promote democracy at home as well as abroad.
- Working towards radical real-time transparency for political advertising, donations and spending, including an easily searchable public database of all online political adverts.

Questions:

Q31 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above?*

Q32 *To what extent is the authoritarian regimes bloc (e.g. Russia, China and Iran) interfering in Western democracy?*

Q33 *How should we tackle malicious/misinformation campaigns on social media with appropriate regulation and oversight within the confines of individual liberties in a liberal democracy?*

Q34 *How can we work with our European partners and beyond to build our intelligence services capacity?*

Q35 *Should we strengthen the existing Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS) and if so how? Should the government broaden the list of countries on the enhanced tier list?*

Q36 *Should there be a requirement on Ministers to explain how foreign interference is being combatted?*

Q37 *Which government institutions should we rely on and expand their mandate to monitor and act on possible foreign interference?*

6 Young People, Modernisation, and Civic Engagement

Background

6.1 16- and 17-year olds do not have the right to vote for the Commons and local government in England, although they do have the vote for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd and for local government in Scotland and Wales. Liberal Democrats have long championed votes at 16, and welcome the current government's commitment to legislate on this issue. Turnout at elections has generally been lower for younger people and many young people feel alienated from the existing democratic system.

6.2 The advent of votes at 16 makes it urgent to address these issues. There is also a wider problem of a lack of understanding of how politics works. Many people do not understand where the layers of responsibility lie between local, regional, national and UK-wide governments on different issues or how these responsibilities differ between one postcode and another. General elections are in fact a series of individual constituency elections, but many voters see them as a vote for a Prime Minister, with some potentially quizzical as to why they cannot vote for party leaders directly. While it is difficult to teach an informal, uncodified system such as the UK's, there is a clear need for better political education, which would benefit more than just young people.

6.3 We should also be seeking to involve more people in civic and community activity generally, not simply turning out to vote in elections. For many people getting more involved in their communities will be the way into greater political awareness and engagement.

6.4 Administrative arrangements also make it unnecessarily difficult for some people, including young people and members of ethnic minorities, to register and cast their vote.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in UK general elections and referendums, and local elections in England.
- Establishing national and local citizens' assemblies to ensure that the public are fully engaged in finding solutions to the greatest challenges we face, such as tackling the climate emergency and the use of artificial intelligence and algorithms by the state.
- Introducing a legal requirement for local authorities to inform citizens of the steps they must take to be successfully registered with far greater efforts in particular to register underrepresented groups, and ensuring that the UK has an automatic system of inclusion in elections.

Questions:

Q38 *Do you support the policies set out above?*

Q39 *How can we make it easier for people to register and exercise their vote while maintaining the integrity of the voting system?*

Q40 *What forms, if any, of other interaction with the state should be prioritised for automatic voter registration including for eligible voters abroad (e.g. passport application, HMRC, DWP including benefits and pensions, driving licence application, GP and dentist registration)?*

Q41 *How can engagement with elected representatives at local and national level be improved using digital and remote access technology? What about broadcast or livestreamed debates in constituencies with all*

parliamentary candidates participating?

- Q42 *What resources are needed to enable young people to become advocates for their own political representation and feel empowered in political engagement?*
- Q43 *Who, if anybody, should be responsible for improving civic education for all age groups, and how can we ensure that it is impartial?*
- Q44 *What kind of measures can we take to enhance media literacy (particularly towards social media)? How should campaigns be carried out to counter the deluge of misinformation?*
- Q45 *How can we involve communities in providing information and explanation on current events?*
- Q46 *Does it matter that we support votes at 16 while in other contexts defining adulthood from 18?*
- Q47 *What measures can we take to improve voter turnout, especially among the younger age group?*

7 Local Democracy and Devolution

Background

7.1 A vigorous local democratic culture is the bedrock for a healthy democracy. Many people are more likely to get actively involved in local issues directly affecting their communities than in national politics, and are more likely to feel a direct connection to their local representatives.

7.2 Yet local government's ability to serve its communities has been weakened by the actions of central governments over many years. In particular, Labour's latest round of local government reorganisation risks undermining democracy at the very local level.

7.3 England remains a highly centralised state. Liberal Democrats support passing more powers down from Westminster and Whitehall to the regions. However the current model of Combined Mayoral Authorities raises serious concerns about accountability, with low turnouts in elections and limited scrutiny by elected councillors, and remains frustratingly opaque.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies include:

- Implementing the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for local elections to ensure proportional representation and better councillor accountability.
- Ending the top-down reorganisation of councils and the imposition of elected mayors on communities who do not want them.
- Decentralising decision-making from Whitehall and Westminster by inviting local areas to take control of the services that matter to them most.

Questions:

Q48 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above?*

Q49 *How can we restore a truly local element to democratic empowerment in the light of Labour's centralising reforms in England?*

Q50 *What is the role of Parish/Town councils in England?*

Q51 *Is the simple number of local representatives the key to keeping people and communities connected to the exercise of power?*

Q52 *Should we expand the power of recall to local government?*

Q53 *How can we increase the scrutiny and accountability of Combined Mayoral Authorities? Is it, for example, practicable to provide clear channels for advocacy and the exercise of influence open to all councillors within a combined authority area?*

Q54 *Does the current split-responsibility arrangement for election law enforcement work, especially for local elections?*

8 Radicalisation

Background

8.1 Extremism and radicalisation pose a systemic threat to liberal democracy through erosion of trust, participation, and pluralism. The ways they spread include disinformation campaigns, conspiracy movements, intimidation of minorities and political actors, and narratives delegitimising elections, courts, the media, and public institutions. They are often driven by long-term exposure to grievance-based narratives, particularly online, and are intensified during moments of crisis and political uncertainty.

8.2 By focusing on democratic resilience, transparency, and community empowerment, Liberal Democrats can offer a principled, evidence-based defence of democracy that protects liberty while confronting authoritarian and extremist threats.

8.3 Existing government policies have tended to prioritise security responses to violent extremism. While necessary, this approach alone is insufficient to address the broader democratic harms associated with non-violent extremism and misinformation.

Existing Liberal Democrat policies:

- Scrapping the Prevent Strategy, and replacing it with a new programme called 'Engage' – an inclusive community engagement strategy that would support communities to lead in developing their own approach to tackling the dangers of violent extremism.
- Improving cooperation with our European neighbours including by working with Europol and Eurojust to develop and implement a joint strategy for dealing with cross-border threats, with the closest possible cooperation on shared priorities.

Questions:

Q55 *Do you agree with the existing policies set out above?*

Q56 *To what extent is it the role of the government to discourage anti-democratic or harmful ideologies?*

Q57 *What obligations should be placed on large online platforms to regulate promotion of extremist content, disinformation and crisis amplification? Would you support a duty being imposed on social media and other tech companies to have 'Community Safety Teams' to tackle extremism, hate, misinformation and other harmful content?*

Q58 *Do you believe that counter-extremism funding should primarily be spent through the police?*

Q59 *Do you believe enough support is given to local authorities, teachers and others in terms of safeguarding about extremism?*

Q60 *Should we create a long-term, ringfenced Community Democratic Resilience Fund to support youth services, training for educators and local democratic participation initiatives?*

Q61 *Should we seek to establish a common definition of the term 'extremism'? If so, how could that be balanced with freedom of speech concerns?*

Annexe: Remit

After years of Conservative chaos and scandal, and months of Labour failure and inaction, public trust in politics is lower than ever – and we have seen how populists and authoritarians in the UK and around the world seek to exploit that lack of trust and new media to undermine our fundamental liberal democratic principles.

This working group will develop the Liberal Democrat defence of Britain's liberal democracy: how to transform our broken political system to restore trust and put meaningful power in people's hands.

It will set out ways to:

- Defend our democracy from foreign interference
- Limit the undue influence of powerful individuals and corporations with vested interests
- Combat sleaze and uphold high ethical standards of conduct in public life
- Improve democratic participation and engagement and make our democratic institutions more representative and accountable
- Protect and safeguard the democratic rights of minority groups, including racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and vulnerable populations
- Make elections fairer and more transparent and raise the quality of political debate, addressing the impact of online campaigning and social media
- Strengthen fundamental democratic rights that were undermined by the Conservative Government and defend them from increasing attacks by the populist right

The group will identify up to three headline policies that the party can communicate widely to help elect as many Liberal Democrats as possible – especially at the next general election.

It will build on the policies in Policy Paper 145, *Democracy and Public Debate*, and our 2024 general election manifesto, as well as the motions *Restore Standards in Public Life* and *Fair Votes Now*, passed by conference in 2023 and 2024 respectively. (It will not look at proposals for a federal United Kingdom, which were covered in depth by two policy motions in the last Parliament.)

The group will take evidence and consult widely both within and outside the party. This evidence should inform the group's proposals, which will be presented alongside an analysis of costs and an Equalities Impact Assessment.

A policy paper of no longer than 10,000 words should be produced for debate at Autumn Conference 2026. Prior to that a consultative session should be held at Spring Conference 2026, and a draft policy paper should be presented to the Federal Policy Committee by June 2026.

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