

Policy Briefing: Funding of Political Parties

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Why does the funding of political parties matter?

Political parties perform important roles without which representative democracy could not exist. They offer alternative policies from which voters choose at elections, organise campaigns to mobilise voters and perhaps most importantly they field candidates for public office. Political parties may be unpopular but there is simply no better alternative model for organising democracy. They are still the only effective mechanism by which normal people can have any personal contact with the body politic, but they are now nearing critical condition in terms of their ability to perform the set of tasks we need them to perform. The status quo of mistrusted parties funded by a small group of rich individuals or organisations is not sustainable.

In Britain, we have a long tradition of valuing and celebrating the involvement of people and organisations in community and charitable activity. The government has established programmes and set targets to promote volunteering and community activity. Yet participating in politics is not recognised as public service in the same way. Whilst to some extent it is not surprising that politicians lack the confidence to include their own area of community activity in these sorts of targets, it is a regrettable indication of how political parties have been cut off from the concept of community service.

It is important that we start defending political parties as public institutions and recognise their importance to our civic as well as political culture. We need to accept that political communication between parties and the public is absolutely essential, and that many traditional methods of organising this are under-resourced and expect too much from too few people. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that political communication and campaigning can be done with anything like the same effect if they are conducted only by central party headquarters and rely upon expensive advertising rather than personal contact. The price of political campaigning - both during and between elections - is the price of democracy. We need to find ways of encouraging and nurturing political activity at local or constituency level. Any new form of public subsidy for political parties should have the aim of encouraging wider political participation, and increasing local political activity.

A brief history of the funding of political parties

The funding of political parties has been an almost constant source of scandal and intrigue ever since Lloyd George fixed his tariff for donors in search of a peerage or knighthood.

During the 1970s and 80s, Labour was repeatedly described as "in hock to the unions" and the Conservative Party benefited from large corporate donations and contributions from foreign supporters. Neither party was forthcoming about precise amounts received from each donor.

During the 1990s, "Tory sleaze" and the decline of the culture of deference led to demands for greater openness. In 1996 Labour, followed by the other parties, voluntarily published lists of donors who had given a total of £5,000 or more during the year, but without the specific amounts.

Following a report by the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 introduced the regulation of donations to political parties for the first time.



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Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000

PPERA set up the Electoral Commission and established the first legally binding rules on donations to political parties.

- Political parties can now only accept donations of more than £200 from UK registered voters or UK based organisations and companies;
- Gifts in kinds such as the use of office space are now categorised and published as donations;
- Political parties are required to make quarterly returns to the Electoral Commission detailing the cash and non-cash donations received by the party locally and nationally;

Political parties must report donations over £5,000 accepted by the party nationally or donations of £1,000 accepted locally or regionally. PERA also placed a £19,230,000 cap on campaign expenditure in the year running up to a general election for Great Britain and £540,000 for Northern Ireland based on £30,000 per constituency contested. Neither of the big spending parties came close to spending this amount in the 2001 general election.

Any hopes that making party funding transparent would prevent allegations of sleaze continuing under the new Government have been sorely disappointed. Controversy continues to surround large donations such as those from medical millionaire Paul Drayson and Indian steel baron Lakshmi Mittal. Transparency has meant that actual cases of corruption are very rare but this has done nothing to address the perception that money buys influence. Anyone who has the ability to donate £1million to a political party is likely to have substantial business interests which will be affected by Government policy in a number of areas at any given moment in time. The ongoing “Loans for Lordships” row has only compounded public cynicism.

Transparency alone has not changed the way that political parties are financed. Labour is once again increasingly reliant on the unions. For its part, the lion's share of Conservative party funding comes either directly from the state, from Eurosceptic millionaires and from “unincorporated associations” which guarantee the anonymity of their donors. The Liberal Democrats have been caught out as well, with a major donor being prosecuted for fraud and with the possibility they may have to repay his £2.4m donation.

Party funding has always been contentious and although there have been a number of reviews including most recently in 2004 by the Electoral Commission, their recommendations have failed to be taken up by the political parties. The Government

has now commissioned Sir Hayden Phillips to review the funding of political parties with a view to trying to find as much of a consensus as possible on a future system for the funding of political parties in the United Kingdom. For more information please see www.partyfundingreview.gov.uk/.

The New Politics Network has set up a website to encourage participation in the review please see www.haydenphillipsreview.org.uk/.

What state funding already exists?

The state already funds political parties to some extent, but it does so in a piecemeal and haphazard fashion. Also the funding tends to be aimed at the party centrally and doesn't always filter through to local parties.

Generally as a function has been recognised as necessary to the healthy functioning of our democratic system so it has been funded at to some degree by the state. The first example of this was the granting of salaries to MPs from 1911 onwards. Up to this point only those with a private income could afford to stand for election to the House of Commons. This inevitably excluded the majority of the population and made those who held public office more susceptible to allegations of corruption so a form of state funding was introduced to bolster public confidence. For a full breakdown of the assistance political parties currently receive please see the appendix.

What's wrong with the current system of funding political parties?

Under the current system political parties are caught in a vicious circle whereby the perception of sleaze and corruption undermines public trust in politics, politicians and political institutions, thereby depriving them of members and forcing them to rely more heavily on large donations from individuals.

1. It creates a dependency between political parties and high value donors

Participation in politics is at an all time low. Turnout in the 2005 General Election was just 61% and, notwithstanding New Labour's surge in the mid-1990s, party membership has continued to decline over the last 30 years. The systems that have kept political parties running over the past century are breaking down. As membership has fallen political parties have become increasingly dependent on large donations from individuals to fund their election campaigns.

The spending cap introduced by the Political Parties Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), has ended the 'arms race' of increasing spending during the 1990s, but substantial sums of money continue to

be spent on election campaigns. In the 2005 General Election political parties spent over £35m across England, £3.7m in Scotland, £2.3m in Wales, and over half a million pounds in Northern Ireland. The Labour and Conservative parties accounted for 84% of the total spending by political parties.¹ These amounts cannot be raised from a dwindling membership base so parties are heavily dependent on trade unions and a few companies or rich donors.

2. It creates the perception of sleaze in politics

If a businessman or business woman gives £100,000 to charity, he or she is praised for putting something back into the community. The state also recognises the contribution that they are making by allowing the charity to reclaim the tax on the donation through gift aid. However if the same person gives the same sum to a political party, the question asked is “What’s he/she getting out of it?” In most cases the answer is “nothing”. Unfortunately while transparency has reduced the risk of actual corruption it has done nothing to address the public’s perception of sleaze or to restore faith in the political system.

It simply isn’t healthy for any party to be dependent on a small number of individuals for the amount spent in a General Election, but still be appealing for wide spread support from the country. Politics not only needs to be clean of sleaze and corruption – it needs to be seen to be clean. As long as a reasonable connection can be drawn between donations to a party and a policy decision, there will be suspicion of

corruption or undue influence.

3. Politics becomes increasingly centralised

As party membership has fallen political campaigning has become increasingly centralised. In marginal constituencies in particular, parties often compensate for a lack of activists by using direct mail or national advertising. This may be effective at winning the seat and engaging with a party’s natural supporter base but it does not meet the electorate’s basic desire for personal contact with the people that they are being asked to vote for.

The long term effect of personal contact on people’s perception of politics and politicians is significant. If over successive election campaigns a person has never been canvassed personally, has not met either the candidate or a representative of the party, the likelihood of them having a positive view of politics and politicians and consequently the likelihood of them turning out to vote, is likely to drop significantly. Canvassing is an essential part of election campaigning, which forces both the electorate and the political parties to engage with each other, warts and all. A study by Denver, Hands, Fisher and MacAllister² found that at best, i.e. in marginal target seats, at most half of the electorate was canvassed in the 2001 general election campaign. This fell to 18% for the Labour and Conservative Parties and 8% for the Liberal Democrats in non-target seats.

Funding targeted specifically at encouraging local activism could help to break the cycle.

Options for reform

Thresholds

Whenever discussing state funding for political parties it is necessary to explore who should qualify for support. One of the issues with the current system of funding is that it favours established parties who have elected representatives in Westminster. The Green Party for instance does not receive state support despite having elected representatives at local, devolved and European levels of governance. We believe that it is important that any system of state funding should support the emergence of new political groupings and interests. Therefore the New Politics Network believes that political parties that have representation at a devolved, national or European level should be eligible for any system of state support.

Donation Caps

What are they?

Upper limits on donations to political parties, so that

parties could not accept any donation over a particular sum, say £5,000. Alternatively, the cap could be targeted at companies and affiliated organisations. In Canada, for example, individuals can donate up to \$10,000 to a political party but all trade union and corporate donations are banned. The Conservative Party has proposed a ban on all corporate and union donations and a cap on individual donations at £50,000

Why introduce them?

Donation caps are the simplest and most effective way of addressing both the root causes and perception of sleaze and corruption. In addition, the setting of “mega caps” (i.e. limits on donations of £500,000 or £1 million) would stop individuals from being able to radically destabilise, or influence a single election campaign with one very large donation. But if they were introduced, parties would have to receive some other form of income in order to operate effectively nationwide.

What does the New Politics Network say?

The New Politics Network supports a donations cap

of around £5,000 to £10,000. We believe that it would have to be set at a low level in order to reduce the perception of sleaze. However we do not believe that party funding reform should be used to change the relationship between political parties and interested groups. Therefore we would allow trade unions to act as “brokers” between individual members and the political party.

The involvement of civic society organisations such as the trade unions in the political life of this country should be welcomed and celebrated, particularly at a time when other forms of participation are in decline. However if we want to reduce concern about large donations, whilst ensuring that political parties remain active, some elements of the relationship should be reformed. In order for affiliation fees to be regarded not as a large single corporate donation but as a large number of small donations from individual members, the operation of political funds must be based on the active consent of individual trade unionists. Affiliation fees have to be seen as an individual member making a donation to a political party with the encouragement and support of the union and not as part of a backroom deal. We believe that membership forms should clearly state that it is possible to opt out of the political fund and that the details of trade unionists who choose to affiliate to the Labour Party should be passed on to the party. Thus the union acts as a broker between the party and the wider affiliated membership.

This would be a healthy development for the trade union movement and for parties gaining affiliation, at present mainly the Labour Party. There have already been moves in this direction. The UNISON membership form offers prospective members the opportunity to contribute to either an Affiliated Political Fund thereby affiliating to the Labour Party or to the general Political Fund which is independent of any political party.

Spending Caps

What are they?

Upper limits on how much political parties can spend in a single campaign. These caps can be both national and local. Currently, the National Campaign Limit is £20 million for the year in the run up to a general election, while constituency limits are typically around £10,000 for the campaign itself, depending on the size and type of constituency. The constituency spending limits for individual candidates are not counted as part of the national limit of their political party.

Why introduce them?

Spending limits stop wealthy political parties from having too much of an advantage over ones with less access to resources. They stop campaigns becoming

an “arms race” of escalating costs with rapidly declining benefit. They also reduce the incentive for parties to seek large individual donations in the run up to a general election.

What does the New Politics Network say?

We believe that the national spending limit should be substantially reduced and that local spending limits should be increased. This would encourage parties to focus on local campaigning and activism rather than running centralised campaigns. The current state of local party finances is precarious and this refocusing on local campaigning is a welcome recognition of its importance to our democratic system. Increasing constituency spending limits would also benefit new parties and independents as well as the established parties and therefore encourage vibrant local contests.

The New Politics Network supports reducing the national spending limits to £10 million. However, in order to encourage local campaigning, we support raising constituency spending limits by 20 per cent.

Grants

What are they?

Basically, handouts from the public purse to political parties. They may be based on the level of support each party received in the preceding election, or based on the number of parliamentarians they have. They may also be targeted for specific purposes. For example, the Electoral Commission currently allocates funding to major parties for policy development. Other funding is available for international work.

The Conservative Party has recently proposed that there should be a "General Election Policy and Communication Fund"³ to assist parties with the cost of general elections and, between elections, to enable parties to prepare for them in two areas: policy development and the use of up to date technology to enable more effective communication during an election

Why introduce them?

Grants can either be introduced to subsidise the running of political parties in general or to encourage activity in specific areas which are deemed to be in public interest. They are the simplest form of direct state funding political parties.

What does the New Politics Network say?

The New Politics Network opposes the introduction of block grants. Political parties are already highly centralised; a block grant will do nothing to address this and may even make matters worse. However,

grants for specific areas of work are a different matter. Policy development grants ensure that political parties have the resources to develop distinctive and coherent policy programmes to present to the electorate. This is essential if we are to have a competitive party system. Any grants should include parties which have representation in Europe or in the devolved assemblies as well as those which have representatives at Westminster. This will particularly benefit smaller parties and allow new parties to develop at a regional rather than just national level. The key test should be whether the funding will help to connect parties with individuals. But controls will have to be put into place to ensure that the money is used to generate new activity rather than simply subsidise existing work and thus indirectly be used to fund other projects.

Assistance in kind

What is it?

Assistance in kind covers the broad range of schemes by which the state helps political parties to get their message across by providing, or paying to provide a specific service. One example is party political broadcasts, in which parties are allowed a short slot of airtime on the main TV channels in which they can have their say. Another is the mailing of an election address to each individual elector or household; the party pays for the production of the literature itself, while the state pays the Royal Mail to distribute it.

Why introduce it?

Assistance in kind helps parties to communicate directly with the electorate in ways they may not normally be able to afford. In the case of party political broadcasts they would not otherwise legally have access to this method of communication.

What does the New Politics Network say?

We support the expansion of assistance in kind and in particular the extension of freepost to candidates standing in local elections. This helps political parties to meet the electorate's basic desire for information about the candidates wanting to represent them and the different policy options available to them. This basic level of communication between political parties and voters is essential for a healthy democratic system but currently is beyond the means of smaller local parties. This needs to be followed up by personal contact but the extension of freepost provision is a welcome recognition of the importance of candidates communicating with voters.

Tax relief

What is it?

Charities benefit from a number of schemes run by the Inland Revenue to encourage people to give to charity. Gift Aid is the most well known of these, whereby charities can claim tax relief on a donation at the rate of 28p for each pound donated. Furthermore, charities can claim the higher rate of tax for donations from individuals on high incomes.

The Neill Commission Report (1998), which led to the creation of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, recommended allowing parties to claim tax relief on donations. In the event, this was the only significant recommendation the government did not adopt.

Why introduce it?

Supporting a political party is contributing to civil society, in the same way as making a donation to a charity

What does the New Politics Network say?

The New Politics Network supports tax relief on donations to political parties as it would give them a similar status to donations to charity. It would at least imply that we as a society regard political activity as a worthwhile public good. This would also encourage parties to seek out a greater number of small donations rather than very large single donations.

However even with a threshold fixed as low as £100 and set at the standard rate for tax relief, the poorer supporters of a party would lose out, as it would only apply to tax payers. The Electoral Commission proposed solving this problem by introducing matched funding for non-tax payers. In our view this system would be over complicated and we would prefer to see matched funding apply to donations (see below.)

Matched Funding

What is it?

Matched funding is where an individual donation is matched, pound for pound, by public funding. This would of course be subject to an upper limit. It is simpler to administer than tax relief as it applies to all donations and as it does not depend on the donor being eligible to pay tax it is open to people on low incomes.

Why introduce it?

It is currently more profitable for a political party to chase a single £10,000 donation than 1,000 £10 donations. This is largely due to administrative costs, but it has led to fundraising operations becoming

increasingly centralised. Matched funding would give political parties an incentive to chase individual, small donations and subsequently engage more proactively with the public at a local level.

What does the New Politics Network say?

The New Politics Network supports matched funding as the simplest system for encouraging low level fundraising and as the best means for ensuring money reaches the local level. This could be done by offering to match funds for membership subscriptions and donations up to a ceiling of say £20. The local party could keep the money raised locally and the central party would receive the matched funding. For example, if a party received a membership subscription of £10 it would receive another £10 from public funds. Combined with a ban on large donations, this would have some degree of effect in ensuring that parties are accountable to their members and through them to the population as a whole.

Money for Votes

What is it?

This covers a range of systems whereby public funds could be allocated to the parties on the basis of the amount of votes won at a general election. This is the system used in Australia and was the main recommendation of the Houghton Committee.

Why introduce it?

It is simple and easy to understand and in principle links the amount of state funding a party receives to its electoral popularity.

What does the New Politics Network say?

Even though the simplicity of this system is attractive, it would do nothing to encourage wider participation in politics. It would strengthen the "winner takes all" tendency in British electoral politics and doesn't take into account the increasing significance of tactical voting. It would also favour established parties who were able to field candidates in all constituencies and so may hamper the development of new political interests. Nor would this do anything to address the centralisation in British politics as there is no particular incentive for local campaigning.

Registered supporters

What is it?

Under a 'Registered Supporters' system, parties would receive a fixed sum such as £20 for every registered supporter⁴. Parties could sign people up themselves or citizens could proactively request a form when they

registered to vote. This system is similar in principle to that used in the United States to fund presidential election campaigns.

Why introduce it?

In order to succeed in revitalising political parties to any significant degree, we have to look beyond the number of people willing to simply donate to parties. Simply having parties funded by block grants not connected to the participation of individuals would do nothing to achieve this.

What does the New Politics Network say?

The New Politics Network supports the introduction of a registered supporters system. Most options for the funding of political parties work on the principle of giving public money in return for an action that society regards as a worthwhile public good, in this case donating money. Rather than simply valuing money, why not value participation?

In return for accepting money, parties would have to ensure that individuals received certain privileges, such as the right to vote for candidates, to vote for party leaders, or to have a say in policy matters. In effect these rights equate to a certain degree of membership rights: the exact degree, however, would be up to the individual parties to determine.

Parties would have to renew registered supporters regularly and would still be encouraged to recruit full members. If concern arose about the total amount a party was beginning to be able to raise, then Parliament or the Electoral Commission could decide to cap the total amount of money available to parties each year.

Vouchers

What is it?

The Power Inquiry recently proposed a voucher system for the funding of political parties. Individuals would be given a voucher when they voted which would entitle a political party to £3 per annum for the life of that parliament. This is similar to the Council of Europe proposal but under the Power proposal this money would be given to the local parties to spend on grassroots campaigning.

Why introduce it?

This system would give citizens the power to decide whether a party received funding or not. It has the advantage of being simple like money for votes but enables voters to give the money to a different political party to the one they voted for.

What does the New Politics Network say?

This system is at its heart similar to registered supporters system supported by the Network. Though we think that support should be targeted at supporting

International case studies

Australia

Registered political parties are entitled to election funding where an endorsed candidate receives at least 4% of the first preference votes.

The amount a party receives is indexed every six months to increases in line with the Consumer Price Index. In January 2006, the amount was set at 202.075 cents per eligible vote.

Canada

Corporations, unions and other organisations are limited to donating only to candidates; they are banned from donating to the national parties. They can only donate up to \$1,000 total to all candidates and funnelling donations through subsidiaries, executives, employees or anyone else is prohibited.

Individuals can donate up to \$5,000 to each party (including donations to the party's candidates). These donation limits apply to donations made to parties, candidates for nominations by riding (constituency) associations, candidates for election as a Member of Parliament (MP), and candidates for the leadership of any federal political party.

Germany

Germany uses a combination of tax relief, matched funding and money for votes to support political parties.

Membership fees and private donations of up to €3,300 per person and €6,600 for couples are tax-deductible. Contributions exceeding €10,000 have to be listed in the parties' published reports, together with the name and address of the donors.

Under the Parties Financing Act, which came into effect on 1 January 1994 and has subsequently been amended, parties receive from the state €0.70 for each vote cast for their party list in the respective state in European, Bundestag and Landtag (state parliament) elections. Derogating from this, parties receive €0.85 per vote for the first four million valid ballots cast for their state list.

In addition, for each Euro parties receive in membership fees or lawful donations of up to €3,300, the state reimburses them €0.38. State reimbursements

politics at local level, we think there are practical problems trying to channel public money directly to local parties. Also we are concerned that this would only increase participation if political parties are given the details of the people who filled in the vouchers.

for election expenditures may not exceed the funds raised by the parties themselves in any given year. The maximum annual amount of public funds for all parties together may not total more than €133 million (upper limit). These reimbursements are conditional on the party polling at least 5% of the votes cast in European or Bundestag elections or 1.0% in state elections.

United States

Each US taxpayer has the choice of giving three dollars to the Presidential Campaign Fund from their taxes by ticking a box on their income tax return form. This money is then used to fund the following:

- Presidential primary candidates can receive matched funds for donations from individuals. Individuals can donate up to \$1,000, however, only the first \$250 will be matched by public funds. To qualify for these funds, a candidate must raise at least \$5,000 worth of private contributions from individuals in twenty different states. They must also accept a spending limit, which in 1996, was \$30.91 million.
- Presidential candidates can also receive public funds to finance their general election campaigns. Republican and Democratic candidates who win their party's nomination for President are eligible to receive these public funds; however, if they accept these funds, they cannot raise private contributions to fund their campaign as well. Candidates can also spend up to \$50,000 of their own funds. In 1996, the fund for each candidate was \$61.82 million. Third-party candidates can qualify for public funds after the general election only if the candidate receives at least five percent of the popular vote.
- Federal funds can also be granted to each major party to pay for its National Presidential Nominating Convention. The base amount for these funds is \$4 million, which is adjusted for inflation each year of a Presidential election. In 1996, each party was eligible for \$12.36 million in public funds.

The interpretation of the freedom of speech provision in US Constitution (1st Amendment) has made it difficult in practice to restrict campaign donations and expenditure and has created a number of loopholes. In 2002 the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act was passed. It is too early to evaluate whether it will achieve its objective of reducing the influence of money in US politics.

Appendix: Existing Support

Funding for political parties in the House of Commons

In 1975 the Wilson Government introduced funding for opposition parties. Named after Edward Short, the leader of the House at the time, Short money has three components:

1. funding to assist an opposition party to carry out parliamentary business (often referred to as general funds);
2. funding for an opposition party's travel and associated expenses;
3. funding for the running costs of the Leader of the Opposition's office.

Short money general funds are mainly spent on research support for front bench spokesmen, assistance in the Whips' offices and staff for the Leader of the Opposition. Each qualifying party receives a fixed amount for every seat won at the last general election and an additional sum for every 200 votes gained by the party.

Funding for political parties in the House of Lords

Funding for opposition parties in the House of Lords was introduced in 1996. A fixed sum is allocated for the official opposition and a smaller figure for the second largest opposition party. This was amended in 1999 to also make funds available to cross bench peers. In addition the salaries of the Leader of the Opposition and the Opposition Chief Whip are also paid from public funds.

Policy Development Grants

In 2002 a £2 million fund was made available for political parties that have representation in the House of Commons to enable them to develop policy. The fund is administered by the Electoral Commission and allocated to parties according to their share of the vote and the number of electors.

Party political broadcasts

A political party which fields candidates in one sixth of the contested seats at an election qualifies for a party election broadcast at the time of elections and at other key events in the political calendar such as the Queen's speech and the budget. This is an obligation which is placed on broadcasters and is not funded from the public purse.

Free postage and distribution of election material

The 1983 Representation of the People Act (RPA) provides for free postage for one election communication per candidate to every address or elector within the relevant electoral area. The free postage allowance is also available at elections to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, Northern Ireland Assembly and mayoral elections. However this is not available for local elections.

Free use of public buildings

The RPA also provides for the free use of any building maintained by public money such as schools for public meetings during campaigns for local, parliamentary, European elections and by-elections.

Free copies of the electoral register

Electoral registration officers are required to make available a copy of the electoral register for elected representatives, candidates, registered political parties and local constituency parties.

Endnotes

1. *The Electoral Commission Election 2005: campaign spending March 2006* see www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media-centre/newsreleasecorporate.cfm/news/529.
2. *Denver, Hands, Fisher and MacAllister The impact of constituency campaigning in the 2001 General Election British Elections and Party Review vol 12.*
3. *Tyrie. A Cleaning Up Politics* www.conservatives.com.
4. *The Electoral Commission could work out the exact amount per supporter.*



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