

Liberal Democrats Abroad

Summary General Election

Report 2024



NOVEMBER 2024

Preface

This report is a summary of the internal review undertaken by Liberal Democrats Abroad (“LDA”) looking at their role in the run up to, and the delivery of the Liberal Democrats historically successful 2024 General Election campaign.

We wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the newly elected Liberal Democrat MPs and all those who contributed both directly and indirectly to their success, whatever their role. We also thank all members of the LDA General Election Campaign teams, their many helpers in the overseas campaign groups, and numerous UK colleagues without whom the campaign would not have been possible.



The report outlines what we believe went well, what could be improved, and offers suggestions of how we can increase the future value and relevance of working with and for overseas based supporters and electors to the Party’s campaigning, both nationally and internationally.

We look forward to future collaborations that will build on the successes as well as the lessons learned during these campaigns. We are at the disposal of colleagues and teams who would like to discuss our future work together.

Please feel free to get in touch via contact@libdemsabroad.org with any questions or suggestions or to arrange a meeting with relevant members of our team.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats Abroad Steering Committee

George Cunningham Liberal Democrats Overseas

Ian Franks Liberal Democrats in Europe

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Background to the Campaign

For British citizens abroad

The 2024 General Election was the first after the implementation of the Elections Act 2022, which extended the franchise to an additional 2.1 million British citizens overseas, bringing the total to an estimated 3.5 million.

British citizens living overseas gained a 'vote for life', rather than just for 15 years as previously. They became entitled to cast their vote where they last lived in the UK, regardless of when it was they left to live overseas.

This means they can be an overseas elector in any one of the 650 constituencies in the country, and able to vote in July 2024 provided they registered to vote before the deadline for that general election.

So just like in the UK, a voter's chances of electing a Liberal Democrat MP are linked to the ability of each constituency to deliver the Party's targeting strategy at the election.

For voters overseas, it also significantly depends on whether they receive and return their ballot in time for it to be counted or were able to find a UK based proxy to vote on their behalf.



For Lib Dems Abroad

The 2024 UK General Election ("2024 GE") marked the first time the three local parties outside the UK – Liberal Democrats in Europe ("LDE"), Liberal Democrats in France ("LDF") and Liberal Democrats Overseas ("LDO") came together as Liberal Democrats Abroad ("LDA") to fight a coordinated general election campaign.

At the time of the election, the three local parties had 711 members and 1,247 supporters in 107 countries. This included members and coordinators in many countries with a large population of Britons living abroad. The campaign was overseen by the LDA Steering Committee and run by an LDA Campaign Committee.

The campaign planning began 2.5 years before polling day – here are some of the key milestones along that journey:

Key Milestones

2021

October LDA Conference agrees to form the LDA Steering Committee, part of whose mandate is to build an election campaign

2022

April The Elections Act passes, extending the overseas voter franchise by abolishing the 15-year rule and other measures. Lib Dem Peers dealing with constitutional affairs assist LDA until GE 2024

November LDA agrees its campaign objectives and workstreams. Contact starts between LDA and the Chair of the party's Manifesto Working Group

2023

January LDA begins discussions with key Lib Dem decision makers and HQ about integrating its campaigning activities into the Party's overall election planning. These continue throughout the year and include briefings with Party President, Mark Pack; the CEO, Mike Dixon; and Director of Field Campaigns, Dave McCobb

September Launch of Party's Pre-Manifesto Consultation at Federal Conference. LDA engages in the process of trying to have the overseas voter acknowledged in the manifesto for the first time. LDA holds first conference training session for UK campaigners to help them 'Win with Overseas Votes'

November Overseas Voter Hub and Voter Registration Predictor Tool launch for Lib Dem Campaigners

December Overseas voter registration information website www.britsAbroad.vote launched

2024

16th January New overseas voting rights come into effect. Voter registration campaign commenced by The Electoral Commission, with LDA, the other two main UK parties, and campaign groups British in Europe and Bremain in Spain continuing their activities

March LDA launch their 'Welcome pack' for Overseas Electors at Party Spring conference

22nd May General Election called

4th July Polling day

Overall campaign objectives

Our preparation for the 2024 GE started two and a half years before the election with four key objectives:

- Identify and enable the registration of potential Lib Dem voters overseas
- Develop policies relevant to British citizens abroad and ensure their inclusion in the Lib Dem manifesto and campaign material for the next General Election
- Maximise votes from overseas voters for Liberal Democrat candidates in target seats by supporting campaigns through promoting knowledge of and active engagement with potential Lib Dem supporters overseas
- Raise money from eligible donors abroad

Activities prior to general election being called

Our progress on these objectives took place on multiple fronts prior to the general election being called. Here is our summary of the main area of work. A detailed briefing concerning these projects is available on request.

Voter registration

- Engagement with the Government and Electoral Commission in planning the voter registration campaign
- Building a database of overseas based associations in touch with British citizens abroad to offer briefings to these groups in preparation for the launch of the new voting rights
- Using existing LDA mailing lists and online platforms to engage known overseas supporters and the wider public in progress towards the new rights and answering their questions
- Liaising with governmental and regulatory bodies to share overseas electors' concerns and potential improvements needed to deliver the new system
- Promoting the advantages for overseas electors of proxy voting, and their right to choose someone outside the constituency where they have a vote to receive and return their ballot by post
- Small scale testing of data collection and processing of overseas elector lists directly from local authorities in collaboration with Lib Dem local parties in the UK
- Encouraging existing Lib Dem MPs to communicate with their overseas constituents



Policy development

- Identification of key policy areas particularly relevant to overseas electors started in late 2022, building on the 2019 Lib Dems in Europe and Lib Dems Overseas policy paper and feedback from members and supporters.

- Approaches were made to the Manifesto working group and briefings exchanged regarding key areas, plus proposals to conference for additions to the policy portfolio, including the unfreezing of state pensions for British citizen abroad (overseas constituencies being already party policy)
- Using the party pre-manifesto document as a basis for consultation with our own overseas members and supporters

Forging links between Lib Dem target seats and their overseas electors

- Developing and promoting the proposal of 'Win with Overseas votes' as the basis for Lib Dem campaign teams to assess how they might work with overseas electors in their area, depending on their seat's target status
- Preparing briefings and digital resources for use via Lib Dem online platforms including website templates, FAQ's on voting rights from abroad and technical support in obtaining details of overseas electors
- Investigating and proposing new routes to deliver links between overseas electors and the constituency where they have a vote in parallel with the existing Lib Dem digital platforms
- Delivering help to UK Lib Dem telephone campaigns during by-elections and key council campaigns via the LDA [Phone Force](#) joining national and local phone banks



Fundraising

The extension of the vote to all Britons living abroad who had ever lived in the UK potentially provided an opportunity for the Party to play the Tories at their own game and raise money from overseas, carefully within the electoral law of course. With this in mind we:

- Sought engagement with the Party's Compliance and fundraising teams to try to establish mutually-agreed "rules of the game" for fundraising including the ability to hold both UK and overseas banks accounts for this purpose
- Took part in testing and feedback to the HQ Finance team to ensure the newly authorised UK bank account for Lib Dems Overseas complied with the statutory regulations
- Encouraged overseas members and supporters to contribute to both the party's central funds and also, where eligible, to local fundraising appeals
- Maintained sufficient funds in the local party accounts both in the UK and overseas to support the campaign activities such as digital and conference attendance costs

- Requested inclusion as an 'accounting unit' for party election expense purposes for overseas local parties to allow existing funds to be used during the GE campaign

Activity after the general election was called

We started our campaign by further promoting awareness of the changes in the law and overseas voter registration, moving on to a political campaign to vote for the Liberal Democrats.

It was, of course, a very different campaign from those undertaken in the UK, with no door knocking or leafleting. Instead, we ran a mostly digital campaign combined with regular press and other media components, coupled with phoning from abroad and donating money to target seats.

This was all carried out by a small team of dedicated activists who put a great deal of time and effort into trying to meet the overall campaign goals.

We also recognise and thank those activists from abroad who linked up with UK campaigns both remotely and in person to support target seats they had connections with.



Our efforts included:

- [A creative digital campaign, including email and social media](#)
- A regular schedule of social media posts, including by our [Social Media Champions](#)
- [An Ed Davey video appeal to overseas voters](#)
- [A website targeted at overseas voters](#)
- A press and other media campaign
- [Phone canvassing to target seats](#)
- Organising debates and live links to the campaign trail in the UK
- Donations to target seats



Outcomes

As this was LDA's first general election campaign, we ran it as a pilot, adopting a test and learn approach. We have identified areas both of success and where to improve our effectiveness and demonstrate the value and relevance of the overseas electorate and their contribution to the Party's overall success, particularly in the following areas:

There were many positives, including:

- Building a global team of engaged volunteer activists to run the campaign
- Sharing our skills and resources across the LDA campaign teams, in particular through the creation and implementation of our digital campaign
- Demonstrating the value and impact of social media, which available statistics show to have been significantly greater than either Labour or the Conservatives in their work directed at electors based abroad
- Developing an extensive media contact database and sending a range of releases to top-tier UK media and to international outlets including Australia, Asia, the Americas and Africa
- Being mentioned for the first time in international media including Letters to the Editor published in FT Weekend and The Guardian and LDA-authored articles in The New European and EU Reporter
- Using the Party's manifesto commitments to overseas constituencies, to the plan to rejoin the European Single Market, with the prospect of EU membership remaining "our longer-term objective", as well as a broad range of domestic topics of concern to citizens abroad with ties to the UK, as the basis for our campaign themes once the details of the party's manifesto became known
- Engaging with our members and supporters based abroad, and gathering significant data about their experience of the voting process and the administration of the ballot
- Delivering financial and practical support to a group of target seats including directing our supporters to do the same
- Linking with key collaborators from within UK based campaign teams to identify potential areas of support and future joint working

Amongst the key challenges we faced in delivering our objectives were:

- Along with the Electoral Commission and the calculations issued in conjunction with the new voting rights legislation, we were hoping for a record increase in registrations from amongst eligible overseas residents, given the 2.1 million increase in the franchise. The predictions were for a proportionate increase from approximately 234,000 in 2019 to over 600,000

- Official turnout numbers [have just been published](#) and show that the actual figures were disappointingly lower than 2019, at 191,338
- The official report also supports our anecdotal evidence that there were significant issues around the timely receipt of postal ballots, with barely half of their votes arriving back in time to be counted (52%). This compares with 80% return rate quoted for the UK
- In addition, an Electoral Commission's post election survey of overseas electors showed only 26% of those questioned knew about the change in the franchise and that there was a lack of awareness of the alternative proxy and postal proxy method and problems finding someone to help with this in the UK
- Our manifesto contained important and bold commitments of interest and value to overseas electors. However, overseas voters were not specifically acknowledged in it (as they were in the Tory manifesto). Not having the unique offering of unfreezing the state pensions of half a million pensioners abroad was a lost electoral opportunity
- We ran an active digital media campaign through free channels. Unfortunately we were unable to execute plans for a self-funded digital ad campaign directed at overseas voters from our existing funds as agreement was not reached on how to account for this spend as part of the Party's overall campaign budget (LDA local parties had not yet been made accounting units)
- Additionally, we could not ask for direct donations to LDA local party funds from eligible overseas donors for the general election as there was no route that could be identified by which we could spend it
- We received several copies of the overseas electoral registers and data directly from registered voters . However, we were unable to process this fully due to unresolved compliance issues which emerged in the latter part of the campaign
- In addition the core campaign software, Connect, is unable to record data on overseas voters

Moving Forward

We are proud to be members and supporters of the biggest Liberal party in Parliament for 100+ years and who have so many more overseas constituents than ever before.

We are aware that there is no time to lose in planning together to run a more successful, robust and comprehensive campaign for the next general election in the context of the Party's future targeting strategy.

During the next 12-18 months we aim to begin by working collectively to:

- Collaborate with the Electoral Commission and other compatible organisations to drive an increase in overseas voter registration

- Spread knowledge and understanding within the wider Party about the value and values of overseas citizens and their relevant issues, including creating policy targeted at overseas voters for adoption at party conference
- Engage with our Parliamentarians and the next generation of the Party's target seats to offer support with retaining/gaining their seats, including assisting current parliamentarians with larger numbers of overseas constituents to have regular contact with them
- To assist with these initiatives, develop digital campaign tools to enable the effective recording of individual overseas voter details
- Prioritise increasing Lib Dem membership and activist capacity, especially in Australia/New Zealand, Europe and North America where almost four fifths of Brits abroad reside
- Assist the Party vigorously in its campaign for overseas constituencies by engaging with supportive parliamentarians, the Electoral Commission and organisations such as Unlock Democracy to achieve these objectives, if possible, within the term of this parliament
- Provide resources and support for UK constituency campaign teams to 'roll out the digital welcome mat' to overseas electors and encourage these voters to give their help and support
- Work to resolve the compliance and regulatory issues, substantive and precautionary, so that LDA can engage in more targeted direct campaigning and fundraising
- Review the challenges faced by overseas electors in finding proxies and how the Party in the UK and abroad can help them within the current regulatory framework
- Identify and act on strategies for improving the governance, organisation and capabilities in LDA

Conclusions

Liberal Democrats Abroad are committed to delivering more votes and more seats to the Lib Dems and to continue to spread the message of the Party's philosophy and policies to the widest possible audience both at home and abroad.

The Party will be defending small majorities in many seats at the next general election, and having the ambition to build on what are currently narrow margins. Every potential Lib Dem vote in these constituencies will count and although the 2024 GE overseas voter registration numbers seem to have been disappointing, we believe there are significant opportunities for the Lib Dems amongst this cohort. This is particularly true if we emphasise our global credentials and push hard for policies that are in line with the core Lib Dem principles, and which are relevant to overseas citizens.

Liberal Democrats know that acting locally is what wins elections. The same principles apply to the overseas vote. In our case “acting locally” means identifying and campaigning for issues that are important to the overseas citizens and those they care about.

We have activists in place ready to fight for the Lib Dems in every corner of the world and we need to make sure they have the tools and backing to maximise the potential of the overseas vote.

The next general election campaign starts here!

Thank you for reading this report.

Please feel free to get in touch at contact@libdemsabroad.org with any questions or suggestions or to arrange a meeting with relevant members of our team.

