

Fringe benefits: are party conferences a good use of resources for charities and non-profits?

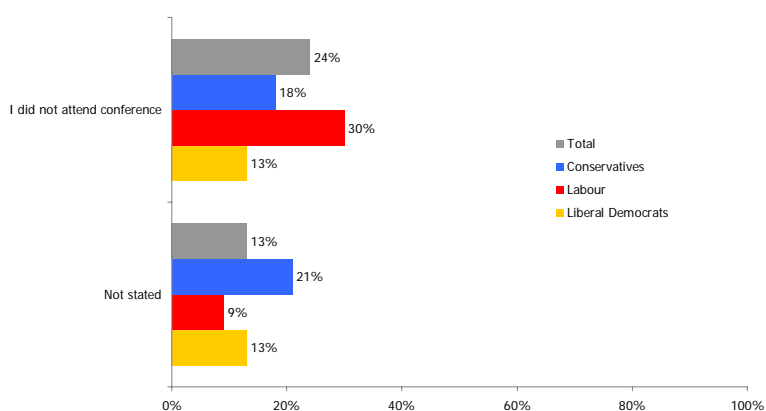
A briefing by nfpSynergy with data from our Charity Parliamentary Monitor

Fringe benefits: are party conferences a good use of resources for charities and non-profits?

As the party conference season gets under way, many charities and non profit organisations will be heading to Brighton, Manchester and Bournemouth to participate in what many view as a key part of the campaigning year. Yet not only is running a stand or organising a fringe meeting relatively costly, but according to our research, a significant proportion of MPs don't even bother attending conference or, if they do, are unimpressed by any charities that may be present.

According to nfpSynergy's regular tracking research 1 in 4 MPs said that they didn't go to their party's conference in 2008, rising to nearly 1 in 3 Labour MPs (chart 1). A further 13% of MPs (going up to 21% of Conservatives) did not answer our question about which charities, pressure groups, voluntary organisations, public bodies or government agencies impressed them at party conferences, implying either that they did not attend or none of these organisations impressed them.

Chart 1: Attendance at party conferences in 2008

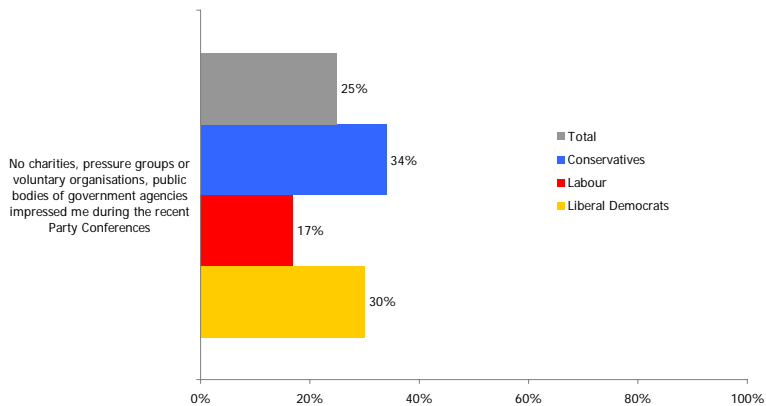


Which charities, pressure groups or voluntary organisations, public bodies or government agencies impressed you during the recent Party Conferences either through exhibitions, fringe meetings, personal contact or any other means? Please list up to 6 charities that impressed you during the recent Party Conferences.

Base: 160 MPs, Nov 08
Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, nfpSynergy

Of the MPs who did attend, 1 in 4 claim to have been unimpressed by any charities during the conference – rising to over a third of Conservative MPs, compared to just 17% of Labour MPs (chart 2).

Chart 2: How impressed by charities at party conferences were MPs who attended in 2008?



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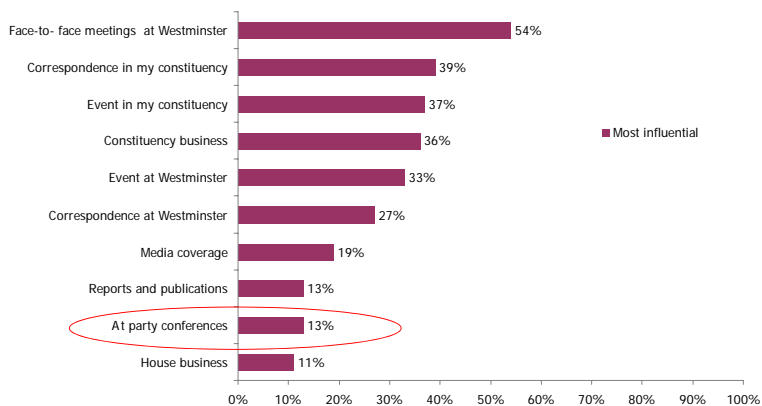
Base: 102 MPs who attended party conference, Nov 08
Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, nfpSynergy

In May we asked MPs and Peers to select the three most influential ways in which they come into contact with charities, public bodies or government agencies (charts 3 and 4). Just 13% of MPs and 9% of Peers rate attending party conferences as one of the most influential, trailing almost every other lobby tactic on the list. Only 'house business' (11%) is deemed by MPs to be *less* influential than party conferences, whilst Peers rank party conferences bottom out of a similar range of options.

So if party conferences are not all the campaigning opportunity that many people make them out to be, where should campaigning organisations be focusing their efforts?

Over half of MPs (54%) rate face-to-face meetings at Westminster as a particularly influential lobbying tactic (chart 3). The next three most influential forms of contact MPs mentioned are all constituency based – constituency correspondence (39%), constituency events (37%) and constituency business (36%) – followed by Westminster events (33%), Westminster correspondence (27%) and media coverage (19%). Like party conferences, reports/publications are mentioned by just 13% of MPs as being influential.

Chart 3: Most influential forms of contact, MPs

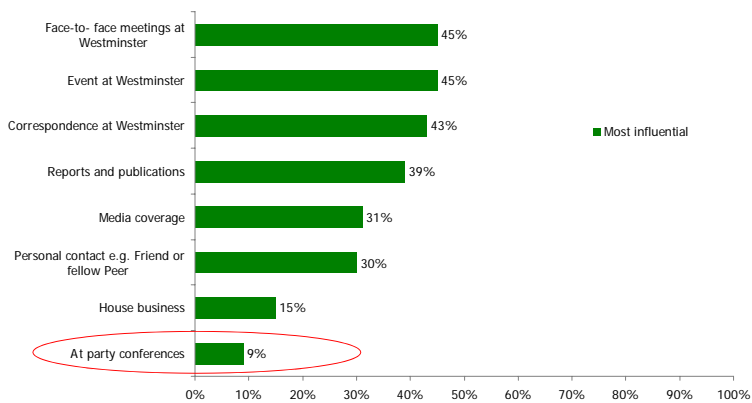


How do you come into contact with charities, public bodies or government agencies? Please tick the three most frequent ways and the three most influential ways (in helping you form an opinion of them) in which you come into contact with these.

Base: 151 MPs, May 09
Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, nfpSynergy

Like MPs, face-to-face meetings at Westminster rate highly with Peers (45%), as do events at Westminster (also 45%) and correspondence at Westminster (43%) (chart 4).

Chart 4: Most influential forms of contact, Peers

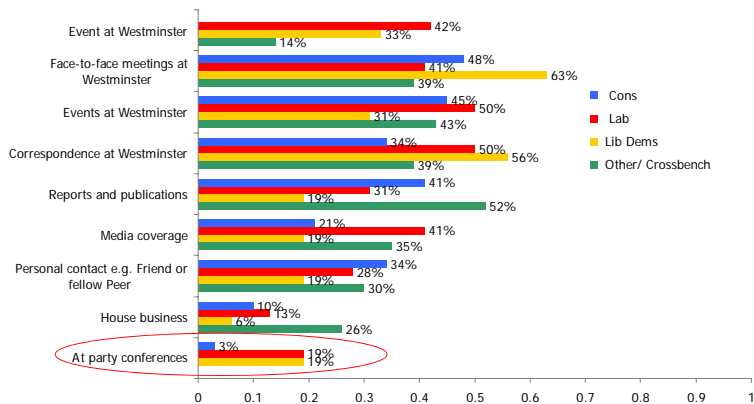


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Base: 151 MPs, May 09
Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, nfpSynergy

Looking at the breakdown by political party, there is a clear split for Peers when it comes to finding party conferences influential (chart 5). Just 3% of Conservative Peers compared to 19% of Labour and 19% of Liberal Democrat Peers find party conferences most influential.

Chart 5: Most influential forms of contact, Peers by political party



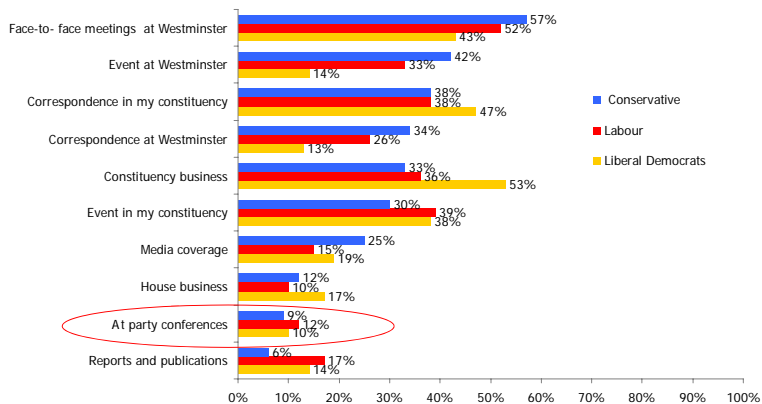
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Base: 151 MPs, May 09
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Meanwhile, there is little difference by party amongst the 13% of MPs who find party conferences influential (chart 6). Note that 13% of the total sample of MPs find party conferences most influential, which is higher than for each of the subsamples shown here as the total is brought up by results from a small subsample of MPs from other parties.

Looking at the breakdown for the other forms of contact, Conservative MPs are notably more impressed than Labour ones by Westminster events (42% and 33% respectively), Westminster correspondence (34% and 26% respectively) and media coverage (25% and 15% respectively). Meanwhile, Labour MPs seem markedly more swayed than their Conservative colleagues by constituency events (39% and 30% respectively) and by reports/publications (17% and 6% respectively).

Chart 6: Most influential forms of contact, MPs by political party

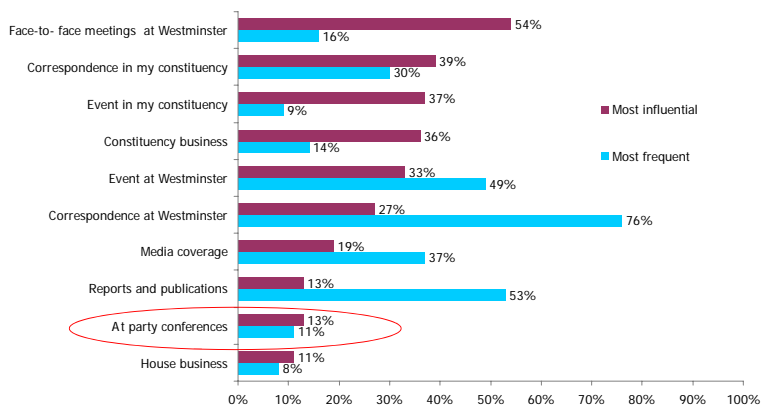


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Base: 151 MPs, May 09
Source: Charity Parliamentary Monitor, nfpSynergy

Comparing the forms of contact that MPs say are most influential with those that MPs claim charities use most frequently (chart 7) highlights a number of underexploited areas: in particular face-to-face meetings at Westminster (54% say influential, just 16% say it is frequently used), constituency events (37% influential, 9% frequent) and constituency business (36% influential, 14% frequent). Conversely, Westminster correspondence and reports/publications appear to be overused by charities – despite their lack of influence.

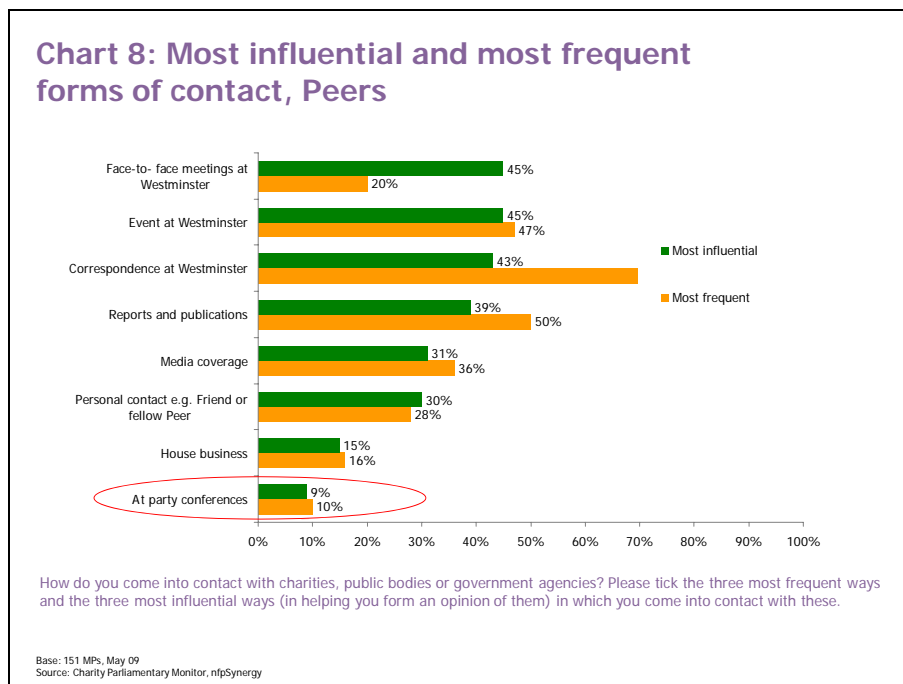
Chart 7: Most influential and most frequent forms of contact, MPs



How do you come into contact with charities, public bodies or government agencies? Please tick the three most frequent ways and the three most influential ways (in helping you form an opinion of them) in which you come into contact with these.

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The same comparison for Peers shows a similar though less marked split; face-to-face meetings at Westminster (45% say influential, 20% say it is frequently used) are underexploited, whilst correspondence at Westminster (74% influential, 43% frequent) is overused relative to its influence (chart 8).



Conclusion

So what can we take away from this research? Contrary to the widely held assumption that party conferences are a vital fixture on the campaigning calendar, charities need to bear in mind the limited value of party conferences as a means to reach MPs and Peers. One key message from this research is not to over-estimate the value of campaigning at party conferences in so far as reaching MPs is concerned.

We have been surveying MPs since the end of 2000 and our research consistently shows the importance for charities of direct, personal meetings with MPs, taking a targeted approach to build relationships with a selected few MPs. MPs' preference for constituency based contact also comes up again and again, something which is particularly underexploited by charities. Though it may require some level of thought as to how best to incorporate a constituency focus into your particular charity's work, our research suggests that it is well worth the effort.

To find out more about nfpSynergy's work with MPs and Peers, email sarah.lincoln@nfpsynergy.net, call 020 7426 8888 or visit our website at www.nfpsynergy.net