# The Form and Function of Party Conferences:
# a heuristic case study of Denmark

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## Introduction

Party conferences are a relatively under-researched area of party life. This is despite representing a considerable investment of party resources and time, getting extensive attention in the media and press and being of high formal importance. To the knowledge of this author only four books (Minkin 1978; Kelly 1989; Stanyer 2001; and Faucher-King 2005) and a handful of journal articles focusing on party conferences have been published in English – most of these focussing on the UK.

This is unfortunate considering the importance of party conferences in the life of political parties. Faucher-King writes of British party conferences that 'they attract thousands of participants and are considered sufficiently important that all parties are prepared to divest substantial sums to hold such meetings in full media glare' (2005: 1). Minkin also notes the 'extensive mass media coverage' of the Labour Party conference (1978: xiii), something echoed by Stanyer (2001: 1) in regards to all three main UK parties.

In addition to the media attention that party conferences get, they are important for other reasons. The several contributions in Katz and Mair (1992) showed the high formal importance that party conferences have in party rules. Because of this significant formal importance of conferences, they have an important unifying function. They are the only place where all three 'faces' (the party in public office; the party on the ground; and the party in central office as outlined in Mair 1994) come together in the same physical space. In a very real sense, the party conference is the embodiment of a political party as a (more or less) unified political entity.

Yet, for all their importance we know relatively little about what happens at these events (i.e. their form), what their purpose or function is, and how these vary from party to party. This article will present the findings from the first stage of a cross-national and ideologically inclusive study of party conferences. The aim of the project is to gain a better understanding of what the form and function of party conferences are and what, if any, variations there are from one part of the ideological spectrum to another. The work of Duverger (1954) strongly suggests that ideology affects party organisations, but there has been little recent work done on this issue.

The focus of this article will be the conferences of all the parties represented in the Danish parliament at the time of the data gathering (2012). Denmark is a good starting point because its generous List Proportional Representation electoral system allows for the existence of a relatively large (eight in 2012) number of parties – all of which enjoy at least some level of influence on government policy (see e.g. Damgaard and Svensson 1989; and Christiansen 2002). Using Denmark as a case study therefore allows for the examination of a good number of 'relevant' (as defined by Sartori 2005) parties stretching from the far-left to the far-right.

Denmark will here by used as what Eckstein (2000: 137-40) calls a 'heuristic' case study - that is, a case study which is concerned with stimulating 'the imagination towards discerning important general

problems and possible theoretical solutions' (p. 137). The purpose of this article is to start to build up a general understanding of the form and function of party conferences – an understanding which can then be used to explore further country case studies, and in turn be informed and improved by such case studies.

The key questions of the paper will be twofold: 1) what is the form and function of the party conferences under investigation; and 2) are there any discernible patterns in the differences and similarities in the form and function of the conferences of the eight parties being investigated here?

This article will first give an overview of the data gathering and the political context in Denmark. It will then examine a number of issues related to the party conferences of Danish parties: their formal role; how delegates are selected; how the agenda is put together; the physical setting of the conferences; how delegates get to speak from the rostrum and what they say; and finally what decisions are made. The article will conclude with a general discussion of the findings.

**The Data**

This study takes an ethnographic approach to the study of party conferences. All four existing books on party conferences (Minkin 1978; Kelly 1989; Stanyer 2001; and Faucher-King 2005) have been based on ethnographic field work. Emerson (et al 1995: 1) describes this as 'first-hand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world by drawing upon such participation'. Somewhat more colloquially, but also rather accurately, Fenno (1978: xiv) describes it as 'soaking and poking – or just hanging around'. This researcher attended seven party conferences in 2012 and hired a research assistant to attend an eighth conference (two party conferences clashing on one weekend). During each party conference extensive fieldnotes were taken covering the activities, the format and physical surroundings of each conference. In addition, conference documents were gathered at each event and party rulebooks downloaded from each party's website.

**Political context and background**

Denmark is a multi-party system which over the last four decades has seen a considerable diversification of its parties. Up until the so-called 'earthquake' election of 1973 Denmark was dominated by four 'old' parties (see Bille 1997: 53-9): The Liberal Party, The Conservative People's Party, The Social Liberals and the Social Democrats. There was also a reasonably well established (pre World War Two) Communist Party, and a splinter from the Communist Party, The Socialist People's Party. The election of 1973 radically changed this set up, and since then there has been some considerable instability in the party system with a reasonably active process of party birth and death. At the time when the data was gathered for this project there were eight parties represented in the Danish parliament (see Table 1).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

**The formal role of conference**

In all eight parties examined for this paper the party conference has a very prominent formal position in the parties' organisations (see Table 2). This importance is also reflected in the financial resources invested in the party conference. Only three parties provided sufficiently detailed accounts to separate out how much the party spent on their party conference. At the time of writing the latest accounts available were from 2010. In that year the Danish People's Party's conference cost the party 1'884'133

Danish Kroner, which amounted to 13 percent of their total outgoings (Danish People's Party 2011). The Socialist People Party spent 546'763 Danish Kroner (Socialist People's Party 2011a). This accounted for 5 percent of outgoings that year. The Red Green Alliance spent 293'082 Danish Kroner, equivalent to 5.9 percent of total outgoings (Red Green Alliance 2011a). 5-6 percent may not seem like very much, but compared to the daily average outgoings of the Socialist People's Party their three day conference cost the party the equivalent of 18 average days of spending. In the Red Green Alliance (also a three day conference) it was 21 days.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

What is clear from Table 2 is that there is a considerable uniformity in the formal status of the conference. In all but two of the eight parties the conference is described as the undisputed highest authority. The two exceptions to this rule are the Conservative Party and the Danish People's Party. In the Conservative Party the conference is only responsible for political questions. Organisational matters have been separated out. In the Danish People's Party there are numerous exceptions to the supremacy of the conference – the importance of which is difficult to ascertain for certain, but overall places a significant amount of power in the hands of the party's executive.

Where there is greater variation is in the details of what the conference does. Some parties have a more or less detailed description of the specific tasks assigned to the conference. Perhaps the biggest variation here is in the election of the party's leadership. In all parties bar the Social Liberals the party's leader is elected by the party conference. In the Social Liberals the conference does elect a party 'chair', but this chair is very much the organisational leader, not the political leader or the party public 'face'. This role belongs to the chair of the parliamentary group. In all the other parties the 'chair' is the party's political and organisational leader. There is further variation in the election of the party's national executive. All eight parties have a national executive which is the party's highest authority in-between conferences. In the Red Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party the entire executive is elected by the conference. In the Social Democrats, apart from the chair, vice-chairs and party secretary, the entire executive is made up of ex-officio members, and regionally elected members. In the remaining parties the party conference elects some members of the party executive, and the rest are regionally elected and ex-officio.

Overall, the rules of the eight parties suggest that the party conference, at least formally speaking, is most powerful in the Red Green Alliance, and the Socialist People's Party, and least powerful in the Conservative Party and the Danish People's Party. There is some variation in-between, most notably that the Social Democratic conference and takes place only every four years, and has little influence on the election of the vast majority of the executive's members; and that the Social Liberal's effective leader is not elected by the party conference, but by the parliamentary group.

**Access to the conference**

There is considerable variation in who gets to go to the conference, although all eight parties have a strong local element (see Table 3).

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The main thing to notice in Table 3 is the variation in ex-officio participants in each party's conference. There are no ex-officio delegates with the right to vote at the conferences of the Red Green Alliance or

the Social Liberals. However, most parties provide ex-officio positions to elements of both national and local leadership groups. The Socialist People's Party does have the caveat that such ex-officio conference delegates do not have the right to vote on key document and positions. All parties to the right of the Liberal Alliance provide a considerable automatic voting presence to their national and local leaders. The Liberal Alliance is an interesting anomaly amongst Danish parties. All other Danish parties base most of their delegates on geographical regional and local representation, often in line with local government or constituency boundaries. This, as Duverger pointed out is a common feature of political parties (Duverger 1954: 40). The Liberal Alliance has done away with this geographical representation of party members. They have simply left it open for any paid up member to attend the party conference with speaking and voting rights. This is clearly a major deviation from 'normal' party organisational practice.

**The making of the agenda**

Having control over the agenda of any assembly or meeting has long been recognised as an important indicator of where power lies in an organisation. As Bauer (et al 1963: 405) argue: 'the most important part of the legislative decision process is the decision about what decisions to consider'. There are then two main issues to consider here. How is the agenda made, and to what extent can bodies within the parties affect the agenda, principally by submitting motions for debate? This is outlined in Table 4.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

In terms of who writes the agenda there is not much of a pattern, at least not on the left-right spectrum. The main pattern is that half of the parties examined had the main points of the agenda specified in the party rule book. There will obviously be a considerable amount of leeway in how that is then implemented, as is almost always the case with organisational rules, but at least the main points are set down for all to see. In both the Red Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party the executive has the power to 'propose' an agenda. This may need the approval of delegates, but the power of initiation is a significant tool in controlling any debate. The most restrictive approaches are to be found in the Social Democrats and the Conservative party where the agenda is simply set by the party's executive.

The power to submit motions also varies across parties, but here there is some left/right pattern. The power is clearly most wide spread in the Red Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party where all members have the right to submit motions. The power is marginally less widespread in the Social Democrats, Social Liberals, Liberal Party, and the Conservative Party, where the lowest party body able to submit motions is the local branch. This is clearly more restrictive than if all members were able to, but still leaves it open to the most basic organisational element of those parties. The Danish People's Party is somewhat more restrictive. Here only the party's executive and groups of 25 delegates are allowed to submit motions. This puts some considerable restrictions on the power to submit motions. For a branch to be able to submit a motion it would need to have at least 231 members (the branch chair and one delegate for every 10 members or part thereof). According to the party's organisational report to the conference in 2012 the party had 94 local branches in 2012, and 10684 members, giving an average of 114 members per branch. Only six branches had more than 231 delegates. In other words, for the vast majority of branches, should they want to submit a motion, they would need to get together with other branches or obtain the assistance of ex-officio delegates.

However, the most restrictive party, in terms of how far down the power to submit motions has been devolved, is the Liberal Alliance. In the Liberal Alliance, only the 10 'Great Constituency' branches have the power to submit motions. This clearly leaves quite a large distance between the individual members and the hierarchical level that has the power to submit motions.

It is one thing what the formal rules are for submitting motions to the conference. Another is how this is then actually used. Here there is considerable variation across the eight parties. In the Red Green Alliance party members made extensive use of the opportunity to influence what was discussed. The party leadership had written a number of draft documents that members had submitted amendments to. One example was a two page proposal for 'The Red Green Alliance's goals 2012-16' written by the party executive. Party members had submitted 100 amendments stretching over 20 pages. Soem members had also submitted motions for debate. In total there were 165 contributions of various lengths made by members. It is worth noting that some of these proposed motions and amendments were written jointly by members from several different branches – suggesting a level of what Duverger refers to as 'horizontal integration' (Duverger 1954: 47-8), i.e. people at the same organisational level talking directly to each other, as opposed to communicating indirectly via the vertical hierarchy.

At the Socialist People's Party conference there were five documents being debated including a new party manifesto, something all Danish parties have – it sets out the party's basic ideals and vision for Danish society. All had been drafted by the leadership, often in consultation with members. All documents had been the subject of extensive membership attention. A total of 507 amendments had been submitted by members, although a great many of these were fairly small. 394 of these were amendments to the draft party manifesto, including an entirely new draft.  As with the Red Green Alliance, there was extensive evidence of horizontal integration. Indeed, almost 18 percent of amendments to a draft of a new party manifesto had been written jointly across several local branches.

At the Social Democrats' conference there were also several documents being debated, attracting a total of 201 amendments from members, including 39 amendments to amendments.  Unlike the Red Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party, there was no evidence of horizontal integration in the amendments sent in by the branches.

At the Social Liberal conference the main membership input came in the shape of proposed resolutions, and amendments to those. There were 63 proposed resolutions sent in by party members and a further 17 amendments to those resolutions, for a total of 80 membership contributions. As with the Red Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party there was extensive evidence of horizontal integration in that many of the resolutions had been drafted by members from several different local branches.

At the Liberal Alliance conference, things were somewhat different. In his opening speech Leif Mikkelsen, the national chairman, argued that resolutions sent in by members was an old fashioned way of making policy. He told the conference that one 'Great Constituency' branch had sent in a resolution. However, after a 'conversation' between the party leaders and the branch leaders the resolution had been withdrawn.

As was noted above, the Liberal Party rules have a basic agenda for the conference written into it. Point 5 of that agenda is '*Behandling af indkomne forslag*', meaning 'dealing with received proposals'. At the 2012 conference when the conference reached Point 5 the conference chair stated: 'we have now reached Point 5 of the agenda: dealing with received proposals. None have been received. We therefore move onto Point 6'. Much the same thing happened in 2011. The only contribution from the members

came in connection with changes to the party's rules. A 'rules committee' set up at the 2011 conference had made a number of suggested amendments to the party rules. A further three amendments to those amendments had been received from grassroots members. That was the limit of direct membership contribution to the agenda.

The Conservative Party, like the Socialist People's Party, was replacing its party manifesto at the 2012 conference. Like the Socialist People's Party the process had involved extensive grassroots consultation, and like the Socialist People's Party, there were still some members who were unhappy with the result - if slightly fewer than in the Socialist People's Party. 37 amendments had been received from the party members. Whilst this may seem fairly minor compared to the 394 from the socialists, it still prompted the party chair to repeatedly comment on the 'many many' amendments that the conference had to deal with – suggesting that this level of membership involvement was unusual. It is worth noting that this was indeed a somewhat unusual year, in that a party's manifesto is only infrequently changed. Immediately after the Conservative Party conference had finished this researcher talked to the two main conference chairs – who said that the typical number of membership motions received, would be around five or six, with some years seeing up to 10 or 11.

At the Danish People's Party conference there were no motions from members. Indeed, there were no documents up for debate, and hence no proposed amendments from members either.

**The setting**

Seven of the eight parties held their conference at major conference centres in various parts of the country. The one exception was the Red Green Alliance, which had its 2012 conference in a sports/community hall in one of Copenhagen's poorest neighbourhoods. One thing worth noting here is that the Socialist People's Party used to hold its conference in school sports halls, with most delegates sleeping on the floor in classrooms. As part of their general professionalization in preparation for government they have moved to holding their conferences in proper conference centres. With the exception of the Red Green Alliance there is then a great deal of uniformity across the parties in this respect.

What is also worth considering is the general layout of the main conference hall. Minkin (1978) in his examination of the Labour Party conference argues that the separation of the 'platform' (i.e. the leadership) and the 'floor' (grassroots members) is important, and that this hierarchical separation is reinforced by the physical placement of each. The raised 'platform' would literally look down upon the 'floor' and this arrangement 'expressed and reinforced a relationship of hierarchy and leadership' (Minkin 1978: 208). It could be argued that it makes sense if those who are assigned the task of chairing the conference are in a position where they can actually see what is going on. Hence, having a raised platform is not in and of itself an indication of a hierarchical relationship. Nevertheless, the layout of the hall may still give some indications as to the relationship between different elements of the party as represented at the conference.

Looking across the eight parties, there is a general pattern to the layout which is found in seven of the eight parties. The basic layout of all the parties except for the Liberal Party (which shall be examined separately) was a main hall with tables for participants and a platform at the front with a rostrum and a table for those selected to chair the conference. Figure 1 shows the layout of the conference hall at the Red Green Alliance conference. With some minor variations in detail this was the general approach in the other parties, bar the Liberal Party. The only significant variation was in where the top leaders sat. In

the Red Green Alliance there was no special seating for the leadership. They would sit amongst the delegates. The same was the case for the Socialist People's Party, the Social Liberals and the Conservative Party. The main difference at the Social Democratic Conference was that when the party's leader (who is also the Prime Minister) was in the hall, she was sat with the conference chairs on the platform. The Liberal Alliance maintains the same pattern as the other parties, except that the leadership is given a more prominent position. The three most prominent people in the party, the 'Party Leader', the leader of the parliamentary group, and the 'National Chairman' all sat on the platform when they were in the main hall. At the Danish People's Party conference the top five people in the party were sat at a separate table facing the delegates. This table was not on the platform itself, which was limited to the 'normal' setup, but to one side of the platform.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

This leaves the Liberal Party. The layout of the Liberal Party conference hall can be seen in Figure 2. In the middle of the hall there was a slightly raised platform, on which was placed the rostrum, facing the delegates. On two tables on either side of this platform were sat the conference chairs and the party's top leaders. In a crescent behind these two tables were sat the delegates. There is also a raised seating area for non-delegates members observing the conference.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

What is worth nothing about this set up is that the conference chairs sit with their backs to the delegates. In all the other conferences the chairs look out over the tables with delegates – at the Liberal Party conference they face away from the delegates. This is not due to some feature of that particular conference centre. The same set-up was used in 2011 at a different venue, and the 2012 conference was held in the same centre used by the Conservative Party and the Danish People's Party – both of which used the 'standard' layout.

There is one further issue to note about the Danish party conferences: their relative openness. There are no major security arrangements compared to e.g. the airport-like security at the Labour Party and Conservative Party conferences in the UK. The Danish People's Party and the Liberal Party did have private security guards at the entrance, but that was probably the most visible level of security at any conference. The Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, was clearly accompanied by two police body guards at the Social Democratic conference, but was by no means 'shielded' from delegates. Indeed, at all eight party conferences senior party members, including the party leader, were often wondering around the conference with little if anything in the way of an entourage. They could frequently be seen in conversation with junior party members. This was taken furthest at the Liberal Alliance conference, where the three most senior people in the party were standing at the entrance to the conference centre to personally shake the hands of delegates as they arrived. It is also worth noting that at the Danish People's Party conference a biography of the newly elected leader, Kristian Thulesen Dahl, was handed out to all delegates on the second day of the conference. During the day a long queue of delegates would form by the leaders' table wanting the book signed by the new leader. It is therefore clear that all eight party conferences affords members with an opportunity to interact with the party's top leadership, not just by addressing them in speeches from the rostrum, but also in more informal ways around the conference venue.

**The rostrum**

It is clear that at the conferences of all eight parties the rostrum has centre stage, literally as well as figuratively. The questions addressed in this section are: 1) how do delegates get to speak from the rostrum?; 2) how many speeches are there?; and 3) what is said from the rostrum (e.g. is there any debate or disagreement in evidence)?

Getting to speak from the rostrum is very simple and also very open at the conferences of all eight parties. At seven of the eight parties, the Danish People's Party being the exception, anyone with the right to speak according to the party rules simply has to fill in a form stating their desire to speak, and hand that form to one of the conference chairs. They then get put on the list of people wishing to speak. There does not seem to be any filtering of the speakers. In the Danish People's Party a would-be speaker had to go to the party secretariat's stand in the foyer to get put on the list of speakers. Again, there was no obvious filtering of speakers.

In addition, the Red Green Alliance, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals have a set of 'standing orders' (*forretningsorden*). The standing orders set out the rules for how the conference will be run, including how much time each speaker would have available during different kinds of debates. The remaining four parties did not seem to have this formalised anywhere. In the former parties the standing orders are formally approved by the conference delegates at the beginning of the conference.

One area of considerable variation between the parties is how many speeches are made from the rostrum. The total number of speeches and the daily average is presented in Figure 3. The parties in Figure 3 are ordered on a left-right scale as judged by this author. What we can see is that there is a certain left-right effect. The three parties of a socialist heritage (Red Green Alliance, Socialist People's Party, and the Social Democrats) clearly have by far the highest number of speeches. Indeed the daily average of these three parties is greater than the total number of speeches at the Liberal Party and Liberal Alliance conferences. The remaining centre-left party, the Social Liberals, also outdoes the right of centre parties even though they are not that far ahead of the Conservative Party. Much the same pattern is repeated in the daily average number of speeches, even if the differences are less pronounced here, with five parties having a daily average in the 50s.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Further to the total number of speeches there are also differences in what topics the speakers use their time at the rostrum to address. Based on a thorough analysis of all the speeches at the eight party conferences investigated, three broad categories of speeches could be discerned:

1) What is here referred to as 'technical' speeches. These are speeches that have a formal nature, that is welcoming/opening speeches by party leaders, and sometimes a local political 'big name' such as a mayor; speeches about formal matters related to the running of the conference; and 'guest speeches' by invited guests from e.g. sister parties or other sympathetic organisations – such as trade unions or employers' associations.

2) Debate speeches, that is speeches that address a specific document being debated at a conference, or raising a matter of internal controversy, such as criticism of the leadership, or an issue the party is split on, or which directly reply to a matter raised by another speaker earlier on in the conference.

3) General speeches. These include a conference attendee raising a particular matter they care especially about, what might uncharitably be referred to as someone's personal political hobby-horse, but that is not directly related to a specific draft document under discussion at the conference. This category of speeches also include what might be referred to as attack/praise speeches, that is speeches primarily designed to praise one's own party, polices and achievements, and/or criticise the activities of political opponents in other parties.

The distribution of speeches across the three categories at the party conferences in 2012 can be seen in Figure 4. What is clear is that 'general' speeches dominate in most parties. The exceptions are the Red Green Alliance and the Conservative Party. Generally, 'debate' speeches are more prominent on the left than the right (indeed are totally absent at the Danish People's Party conference), with the exception of the Conservative Party. The Conservative Party is clearly an outlier on the right. This may well be explained by the fact that party was replacing its party manifesto in 2012 which naturally lends itself to debate. That this may not be typical is indicated by the frequent reference by the conference chairs to the 'many many' amendments being discussed. Clearly, a large number of amendments to documents presented at the party's conference is not the norm, which would indicate that the debate accompanying the 'processing' of these amendments is not the norm either.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

It is worth noting that in the parties on the left of centre, especially the Red Green Alliance, the Socialist People's Party and the Social Democrats, it was not uncommon to have the conference chairs extend a 'sitting' of the conference to accommodate the number of people which had indicated their wish to speak. This was not observed to be necessary on the right of centre – that is, there was not an 'excess' of speakers. The exception was the Danish People's Party where there was indeed more speakers than scheduled time allowed for at one point on the second day. However, here the 'sitting' was not extended. Instead, the excess speakers were told they would not be able to get to speak. It is also worth noting that on the first day of the conference, the conference chairs had to while away 20 minutes with general chat because the conference was running ahead of schedule. At the time the next point on the agenda was the outgoing leader's keynote speech and the party had an agreement with the main television stations that they would run it live. The speech could therefore not start early.

**The decisions made.**

The final issue that will be addressed is what decisions are actually made at the conferences. It was discussed above what issues are mentioned in the formal agenda, but that may be very different from what actually happens.

There can be little doubt that the members of the Red Green Alliance have a fondness for debate, structure and the principles of intra-party democracy, and the decision making at the party conference reflects this. 'Making decisions' is solidly wired into the structure of the conference. This is exemplified by the fact that in 2012 it took the conference 30 minutes, and many interventions from the floor, to just agree on a final version of the agenda. This was followed over the next three days by debate over, and voting on several documents, originating both from the leadership and the members. The conference debated and voted on: a document on the party's goals for the next few years; the leadership's report on the previous 12 months; a process of amending the party's manifesto; a statement on the UN; a heavily contested election for the party executive; amendments to the party's

rules; the party's priorities for the next 12 months; and a plethora of motions sent in by members. For all the documents debated and voted on there were also numerous amendments sent in by members that had to be voted on. In short, a very busy three days.

The Socialist People's Party conference was also busy on the decision making front, albeit less so than the Red Green Alliance. The party debated and voted on a 'political statement', the new party manifesto, its annual priorities document, amendments to the party's rules, and the leadership's annual report. For all of these documents, expect the annual report, members had submitted amendments which also had to be voted on. Indeed, the entire third day of the conference was dedicated to voting on amendments to draft documents and as well as the final documents. It could perhaps be argued that some delegates took their duties as decision makers a bit too seriously when some of them forced a vote on an amendment moving a comma. It is true that a misplaced comma can change the meaning of a sentence – but that was not the case here. It was simply a disagreement over the grammatically correct place for the comma which went to a vote. The party conference also elected 16 members of the party's executive – for which there were 42 candidates.

Likewise, the Social Democrats made a number of decisions at their conference, but fewer than at either the Red Green Alliance or the Socialist People's Party. The main focus of the conference was the draft document 'From here to 2032' – the party's vision for the country over the next 20 years. As with the previous two parties the draft had attracted a fair number of amendments - as had the party's rules. The conference also voted on the leadership's organisational report. Finally, the conference, formally speaking, elected the party leader, two vice-chairs, and a general secretary. However, in 2012 there was only one candidate for each post. This was then not much of a 'decision'.

At the Social Liberal conference, there were two main areas of decision making. The first was debate and voting on various documents, mainly a large number of resolutions sent in by branches. There was also a 'statement' on the 2013 local and regional elections drafted by the party executive which was debated and passed. The second area was the election of 15 members to the party's executive. There were 22 candidates for the 15 places. The conference also re-elected the chair and the vice-chair, but for neither post was there more than one candidate.

In the Liberal Alliance, decision making trails off somewhat. As mentioned above there were no submissions from the extra-parliamentary party to debate, and the main decision made was regarding the party's executive. There were three candidates for the post of vice-chair (the incumbent was re-elected) and 12 candidates for five places on the executive. The conference also voted on a handful of rule changes submitted by the leadership.

The Liberal Party followed a very similar pattern to the Liberal Alliance: there were contested elections for the party's executive, and there was voting on proposed amendments to the party's rules coming from the leadership. The elections for chair and vice-chair were both uncontested. The conference was also due to decide on a lead candidate for the European Parliament elections, but a controversial article by the party's MEP led to the postponement of that decision to the following year.

The Conservative Party was dominated by the debate and voting on the new party manifesto, which also involved dealing with amendments sent in by members. Apart from that there were no decisions of any great consequence made. The party chair and two vice-chairs were all re-elected by acclaim. A new set of rules were submitted to the conference for approval, but the conference did not have the power to change them, only rubberstamp decisions made by the leadership.

No decisions were made at the Danish People's Party conference. No documents were submitted by anyone for debate and the election of three members of the party executive and of a new party leader were all uncontested.

**Discussion**

In his overview of decisions taken at the British Conservative and Labour Party conferences Craig (1982: vii) suggests that one can distinguish between conference that are like a 'rally' (the Conservatives), in contrast to what he refers to as a 'working conference' (the Labour Party). A similar claim is made by Attlee (1937). Whilst it has been argued, with some justification, that this is too simple a view of the two parties' conferences (see e.g. Minkin 1978; and Kelly 1989) it is still a useful distinction – and based on the above, one that seems relevant when looking at the conferences of Danish parties. It seems fairly clear that five (Red Green Alliance, Socialist People's Party, the Social Democrats, Social Liberals and the Conservative Party) of the eight party conferences examined above could be regarded as 'working conferences' in their 2012 incarnation. The remaining three fall more into the 'rally' category.

There is little doubt that the Red Green Alliance conference is heavily focussed on decision making. There are numerous documents being considered – some originating from the leadership, some from the grassroots membership - and all with their accompanying grassroots supplied amendments. There is frequent voting on all manners of issues, and speeches from the rostrum are dominated by contributions to debates on these issues. This is clearly and solidly a 'working conference'. Much the same can be said for the Socialist People's Party conference, although here 'general' rally-like speeches are much more frequent. 'General' speeches are usually focussed on some issue that the speaker cares about, criticising political enemies, praising one's won achievements, or a combination of the three. This is very much associated with a rally, where the purpose is to speak to fellow travellers both directly, and via the watching journalists, rather than contribute to a specific debate. Nevertheless, the decision making is clearly very high at the Socialist People's Party conference, to the extent that fully one third of the conference was devoted to voting. The same pattern is repeated at both the Social Democratic and the Social Liberal conferences, but in both the rally element (general speeches) increases and the 'working' element (debate speeches and voting) decreases.

Once we move to the right-of-centre the picture reverses, with the 'rally' elements taking over. The proportion of speeches that are devoted to debating a specific issue declined markedly, and is replaced with general speeches, and the number of decisions taken also decline. This is illustrated by the lack of any documents under scrutiny at the Liberal Alliance, Liberal Party and the Danish People's Party conferences. Indeed, the only decisions taken at the Liberal Alliance and Liberal Party conferences related to party rules and the party executive. At the Danish People's Party conference, there were no 'working' elements at all. It was all 'rally'.

That this should be the case is perhaps not surprising. Duverger argues that parties of the left of centre tend to be more wedded to the idea of the mass party, in which 'there is a certain more or less open mistrust of the parliamentary group, and a more or less definite desire to subject it to the authority of an independent con trolling committee' (Duverger 1954: xxxv). This is very clearly the case in the parties of the left-of-centre, although the tendency declines the more towards the centre one gets, being strongest in the Red Green Alliance and weakest in the Social Liberals. The desire to subject the parliamentary group to extra-parliamentary control is very much reduced in the parties of the right-of-centre as evidenced by the workings of the party conferences. The Liberal Alliance is the party where

the conference is most, formally and practically, designed to be a rally. It is difficult for party members to get things for debate onto the agenda, and there is no formal representation of local branches. The conference is simply a gathering of all those who can be bothered to turn up, with no attempt to ensure some level of evenly spread geographical representation – much like an actual open rally. The layout at the Liberal Party conference also underscores the rally element of the event. The fact that the conference chairs sit with their backs to the delegates reinforces the idea that the delegates form an audience for what happens on the platform, rather than active participants in a working environment.

The outlier on the right-of-centre in 2012 was very much the Conservative Party, where there was a notable element of a working conference. As indicated above, this may well be explained by the relatively rare feature of a party changing its manifesto. It did appear that even the relatively low (compared to the left-of-centre parties) number of amendments was seen as unusually high compared to other years. This would suggest that the rally elements will usually be higher. Nevertheless, the relatively strong working element at the Conservative Party conference, at least compared to other right-of-centre parties, is important to note, because it says something about why the left-of-centre conferences have a stronger working element than the right-of-centre. This appears to have less to do with the formal structure of the conferences across the political spectrum. In all eight parties there are significant opportunities to raise matters for debate – albeit less so in terms of the agenda in the Liberal Alliance and the Danish People's party. However, the rostrum was still wide open in these parties, and hence dissatisfaction with this state of affairs would have been easy enough to raise. Hence, the lesson of the Conservative Party is that a working conference is entirely possible on the right-of-centre, should either leaders or member desire it. This is also supported by the Liberal Party, where the power to submit motions is as wide-spread as in the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals and the Conservative Party, but members *chose* not to exercise that right. In short, the potential for negotiations, and thus a working conference, is there to some extent in all parties on the right-of-centre, but only rarely realised due to membership restraint.

This finding makes sense in the context of what we know about membership loyalty to their leaders. Research suggests that members of left-wing parties are more willing to challenge the leadership than parties of right-wing parties (see e.g. Hansen and Pedersen 2003). It also suggests that Michels' (1915) widely accepted claim that parties are inherently oligarchical and Katz and Mair's (2002) claim that in the struggle for control over party organisations the party in public office has won, should be subject to some modification. At least in the case of Denmark several parties show evidence of heavy membership involvement in decision making (or 'voice' in Hirschman's (1970) parlance). Where this is not the case the lack of involvement is driven less by the leadership actively suppressing membership voice, and more to do with membership acquiescence (Hirschman's 'loyalty')

This then suggests that Craig's observation regarding the British Labour Party and Conservative Party conferences is also applicable to Denmark – i.e. that party conferences can fulfil a combination of two functions: as a working conference or as a rally. In any conference there is likely to always be elements of a rally. A party conference will always be an opportunity for delegates to mingle with the great and the good of the party.  This was certainly the case in all eight Danish party conferences – a feature strengthened by the very open nature of the events and the easy accessibility of the party leaders. In addition, all eight party conferences were open to the press, which means that it provided an opportunity for key party leaders to use the event to send a message to the voters and political competitors via the journalists. Elements of the rally are therefore universal, as is perhaps the case in any major gathering of an organisation. However, the 'working' element is much less universal and can

sometimes be negligible (Liberal Alliance and the Liberal Party) or even completely absent (Danish People's Party).

A number of lessons can then be learnt from the eight Danish Party conferences studied here:

1. A relative invariance in the formal form and function of the party conference hides a massive variance in practice.
2. The variance in practice is to a significant extent driven by the political culture of each party, and seems to be linked to ideology. The left-of-centre seems to be far more wedded to the 'working' style of conference, rather than to the rally. The opposite is the case on the right-of-centre, although not invariably so, as exemplified by the Conservative Party.
3. The variance is achieved less through active leadership suppression of membership voice, but instead by membership acquiescence (loyalty). In other word, and linked to (2), the variance is driven more by informal rather than formal factors (e.g. formal party rules).
4. Despite the heavy presence of the media, alleged leadership control, and the general increase in professionalization arguably found in most parties (see e.g. Farrell and Webb 2000), party conferences retain the potential to be sites of negotiation between leaders and grassroots – i.e. membership voice.

The still remaining question is to what extent similar patterns are found in other countries, and only further research on party conference can answer that.

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| Table 1: Basic information on each party in the article | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Party (ordered left to right, most left-wing being at the top.) | Founded | MPs[1] | Members[2] | Brief history |
| Red Green Alliance | 1989 | 12 | 8000 | Started as a merger between several small far-left parties, including the old Danish Communist Party. It has had an at times precarious existence electorally but has been continually represented in the Danish parliament since 1994. |
| Socialist People's Party | 1959 | 16 | 16363 | Was founded by the former leader of the Communist Party when his USSR critical line was defeated by a majority of the communist leadership. Has slowly moved right wards since its founding and became a coalition partner in 2011. |
| Social Democrats | 1871 | 44 | 44764 | Is the main centre-left party in Denmark. It has a long history of government participation, usually in coalitions and always being the prime ministerial party. It suffered several electoral defeats in the 1980s and again in the early 2000s. Its first female leader, Helle Thorning-Schmidt returned the party to power in 2011. |
| Social Liberals | 1905 | 17 | 9340* | Split from the Liberal Party in 1905. The splitters were generally seen as being the left wing of the party. Are ideologically fairly left leaning on social issues, and centre right on economic issues. Has for much of its existence been a coalition partner of the Social Democrats, and joined them in government in 2011. |
| Liberal Alliance | 2007 | 9 | 6200* | Main force behind the party was people leaving the Social Liberals. Had a somewhat unstable start as several founding members left the party to join other parties or left politics together. Was stable enough to do better than expected at the 2011 election. Stands on a heavily libertarian, small state, platform. |
| Liberal Party | 1870 | 47 | 42132 | Was originally created in opposition to attempts by monarchists to roll back democratic reforms from 1849. Heavily centred on the agrarian sector, has now become the main centre right party in Denmark. Has frequently led centre-right coalition governments. Ideologically economic liberal, although in the early 2000s moved to the centre in a centre right imitation of Tony Blair's reforms of Labour. Currently the main opposition party. |
| Conservative People's Party | 1915 | 8 | 13148* | Formally speaking founded in 1915, but with roots back to the Royalist, and some would say anti-democratic, old conservative party of the late 1800s. Has often played second fiddle to the Liberal Party, but had an extensive period as main coalition party in the 1980s. Is based on traditional social conservatism and economic liberalism. Has struggled electorally since they lost the post of Prime Minister in 1993. Was junior partner to the Liberals in government 2001-11. |
| Danish People's Party | 1995 | 22 | 10684 | Was created as a splinter party from the populist right wing Progress Party – which it eventually out performed and completely replaced in the Danish party system. Is based on an anti-immigration (and heavily 'Islamophobic'), Eurosceptic and nationalist platform. Was long regarded as 'untouchable' by the other parties, but has achieved considerable electoral success. Was the main supported of the Liberal-Conservative minority coalition government 2001-11. |
| Notes: 1) At the election in 2011. 2) In most cases based on information provided in party conference papers in 2012. Where such information was not provided (the *) the number is based on the Danish Parliament website: http://www.ft.dk/Folketinget/Oplysningen/FAQ/Partierne_PARTI.aspx#ID20090827T095400 | | | | |

| Table 2: General characteristics of party conferences | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Party | Formal role | Other tasks specified in the rules. | Frequency | Length (2012) |
| Red Green Alliance | 'The annual conference [...] is the Red Green Alliance's highest authority' | Elects the party executive; votes on candidate lists for parliamentary elections; votes on appeals against party member exclusions made by the executive. Changes party rules. | Annual | Three days |
| Socialist People's Party | 'The party's highest authority is the national conference' | The national conference lays down the over arching themes for the party's politics, votes on party programmes' the party's laws and rules on proposals from party members. Approves the budget. Elects the national executive and party chair (leader). | Annual | Three days |
| Social Democrats | 'The congress is the party's legislative and in all matters highest authority' | Approves political programmes. Elects the party chair (leader), two vice-chairs, and the party secretary. Can overturn the exclusion of party members made by branches and the executive. | Every four years, with 'themed' congresses in-between. Theme decided upon by the executive. | Three days |
| Social Liberals | 'The national association's highest authority is the national conference' | Elects national chair[1], vice chair and 15 members of the national executive[2], amends the party's general manifesto, amends the party rules. | Annual | Two days |
| Liberal Alliance | 'The association's highest authority is the national conference' | Elects chair, vice chair and five members of the national executive.[3] Amends party rules. | Annual | One day |
| Liberal Party | 'The national conference is the Liberal Party's highest authority' | Elects the chair (leader), vice chair, seven members of the national executive.[4] Decides on procedure for European Parliament candidate selection. Agrees Euromanifesto | Annual | Two days |
| Conservative People's Party | 'The national council (conference) is the party's highest authority in all political[5] questions' | Agrees the party's general manifesto; elects party chair (leader), two vice chairs, and five members of the national executive.[6] Selects candidates for the European Parliament. Changes to the party rules made by the 'Chairmen's meeting' must have the approval of the national council (conference). | Annual | Two days |
| Danish People's Party | 'The Danish People's Party's highest authority, with the exceptions made in Clauses 2, 3, 5, 8, and 11, is the annual conference'[7] | Elects party chair (leader), elects five members of the national executive', sets membership fees. | Annual | Two days |

Notes: 1) the national chair is not the person who 'leads' the party politically. The effective political leader and 'face' of the party is the leader of the parliamentary group. Indeed, the national chair may not be an MP.
2) Out of about 60.
3) Out of about 25.
4) Out of dozens, most of the executive is made up of local branch chairs.
5) The reference to 'political' questions is deliberate and significant. Organisational questions are dealt with by the 'Chairmen's meeting' which is made up of the national executive, local branch chairs and vice chairs, parliamentarians, mayors and regional chairs, chairs of regional committees and the youth party's leadership.
6) Out of approximately 30.
7) These exceptions relate to branches rejecting new members which needs the approval of the national executive; the national executive is 'responsible for the organisational structure' of the party; the national executive can exclude members – a decision which cannot be appealed; the national executive selects candidates for the European parliament; and can give allow for variations in certain of the party's rules.
8) Out of 12.
Sources: Red Green Alliance 2011b; Socialist People's Party 2011b; Social Democrats 2009; Social Liberals 2010; Liberal Alliance 2009; Liberal Party: 2006; Conservative Party: 2006; and Danish People's Party 2006.

| Table 3: Selection of delegates | |
|---|---|
| Party | Delegates |
| Red Green Alliance | National executive decides on total number of delegates, which are then distributed amongst local branches according to their membership numbers. Each branch is entitled to at least two delegates each. |
| Socialist People's Party | Each local branch gets one delegates for every 40 members, or part thereof.<br>Ex-officio delegates are the national executive, but without voting rights on the annual reports or the election of officials to positions that go beyond the conference.<br>The national secretary, the party's accountant, the rules committee, MPs, MEP, government ministers and mayors are regular guest without voting rights. The national executive can invite guests without voting rights.<br>All party members can observe the conference if space allows. Some sessions can be closed to observers. |
| Social Democrats | Each local government district is guaranteed one delegate. In addition every local government district gets one delegate for every 200 members or part thereof.<br>Ex-officio with voting rights are: the national executive, eight representatives from the youth party, constituency branch chairs and one other representative from each constituency branch, and the joint chair from local government districts with several branches. |
| Social Liberals | Every local government district branch gets one delegate for every 15 members or part thereof. Only delegates can vote.<br>All members have access to the conference with the right to speak. |
| Liberal Alliance | All paid up members who turn up have the right to vote. |
| Liberal Party | One delegate for every 150 members in each local branch – each local government district branch is guaranteed one delegate.<br>Ex-officio with voting and speaking rights:<br>The chair of each constituency election committee; the national executive; MPs, parliamentary candidates; MEPs; European Parliament candidates; government ministers; mayors, local government legislators, and chairs of regional committees; up to 25 members of the youth party leadership; the leadership of Liberal Students.<br>Ex-officio with speaking, but not voting rights:<br>Former Liberal MPs; former Liberal government ministers; former Liberal MEPs; members of ant committees established by the national executive.<br>All members can be invited to observe the conference. |
| Conservative People's Party | Ex-officio are (all with voting rights):<br>The national executive; chairs and vice-chairs of local branches; MPs and MEPs; mayors and regional chairs; local government district branch leaderships; the youth party's leadership; Conservative Students' leadership; local and regional government legislators; parliamentary candidates and their campaign leaders; chairs of local youth and student branches; the women's committee leadership.<br>Each constituency branch gets one delegate per 100 members or part thereof; and one delegate for every 1000 votes or part thereof the party received in the constituency at the last parliamentary election. |
| Danish People's Party | Ex-officio are:<br>The national executive; MPs, MEP, and all local government legislators and the youth party's leadership.<br>Each local branch can send the branch chair and one delegate for every 10 members or part thereof. The national executive can decide on a higher number of delegates for all branches according to their membership numbers. |
| Sources: Sources: Red Green Alliance 2011b; Socialist People's Party 2011b; Social Democrats 2009; Social Liberals 2010; Liberal Alliance 2009; Liberal Party: 2006; Conservative Party: 2006; and Danish People's Party 2006. | |

| Table 4: The making of the agenda | | |
|---|---|---|
| Party | Who decides the agenda? | Power to submit motions |
| Red Green Alliance | Party executive draws up a 'proposed agenda'. | Party executive, local branches, committees, individual members. |
| Socialist People's Party | Party executive proposes which issues should be debated. | Party executive, local branches, individual members. |
| Social Democrats | Announced by the party executive as the time when the congress is called. | Constituency and local branches. |
| Social Liberals | Main points specified in the party rules. | Local branches. |
| Liberal Alliance | Main points specified in the party rules. | 'Great Constituency Branches'[1] |
| Liberal Party | Main points specified in the party rules. | Delegates, constituency branches, local government district branches. |
| Conservative People's Party | Decided by the party executive. | Local branches, the parliamentary party, the European parliamentary group, the youth party and the conservative students' association can each submit one motion to the conference agenda. |
| Danish People's Party | Main points specified in the party rules. | The national executive, groups of 25 delegates. |
| Notes: 1) Electorally Denmark operates at three levels: there are three 'National Regions', 10 Great Constituencies (Storkredse), and 93 local constituencies. This refers to the 10 middle level constituencies. Sources: Red Green Alliance 2011; Socialist People's Party 2011; Social Democrats 2009; Social Liberals 2010; Liberal Alliance 2009; Liberal Party: 2006; Conservative Party: 2006; and Danish People's Party 2006. | | |

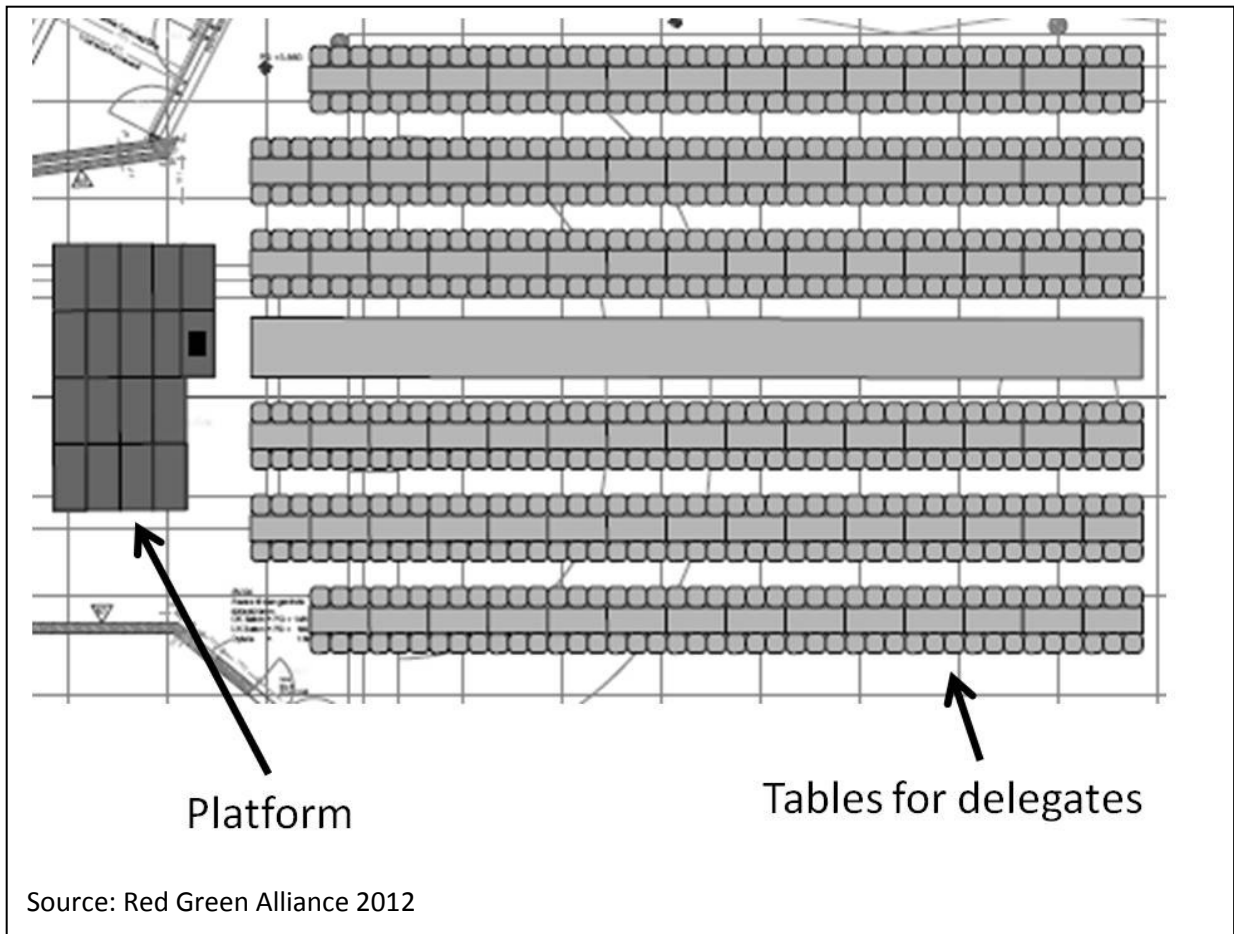Figure 1: Layout of the Red Green Alliance conference hall



Platform

Tables for delegates

Source: Red Green Alliance 2012

Figure 2: The layout of the Liberal Party conference hall



A. The rostrum.
B. Key party figures including the party leader.
C. The conference chairs

Party member observers

Delegates at all the tables in the horseshoe. In addition, two tables for invited guests, and three tables for the press
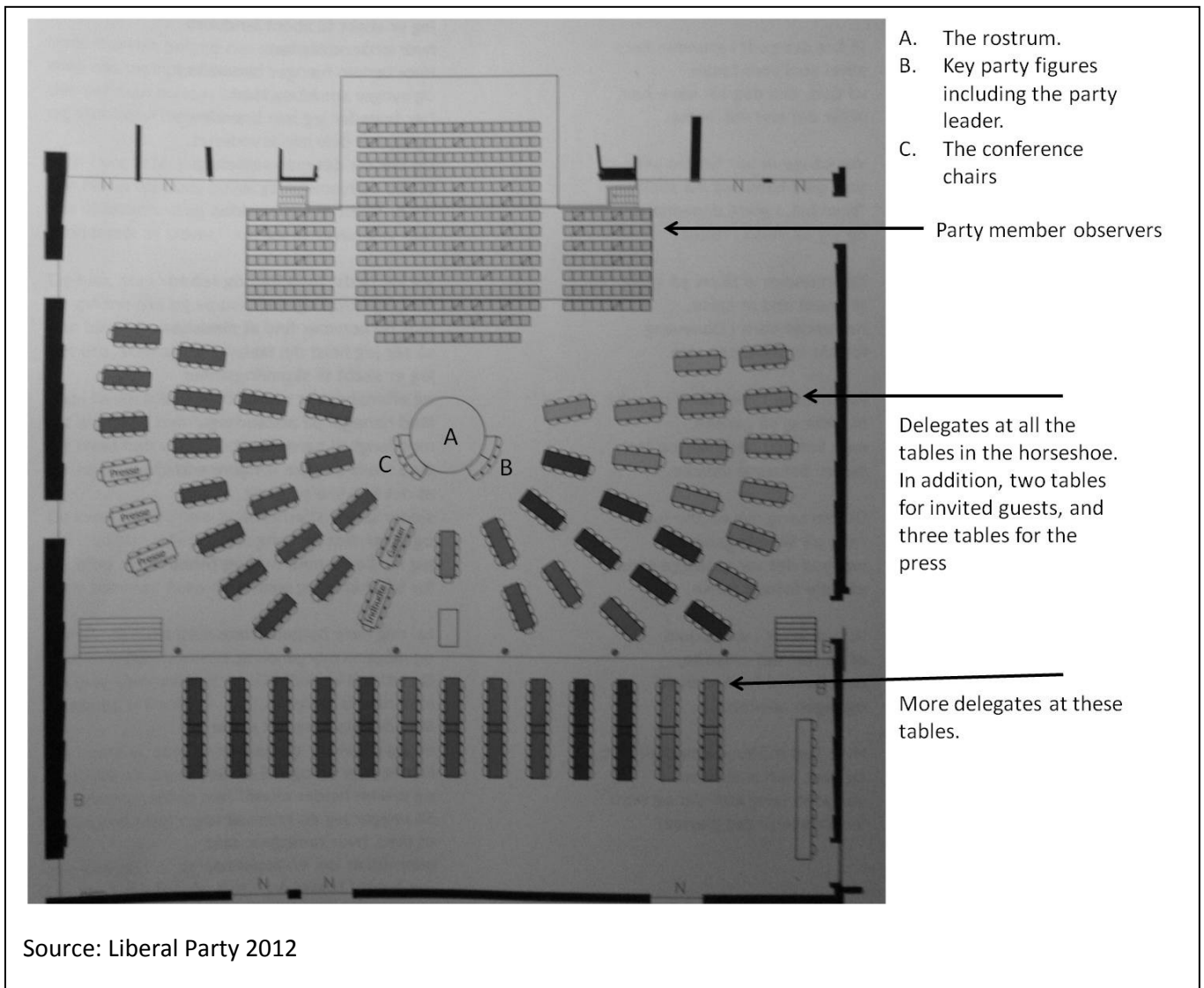
More delegates at these tables.

Source: Liberal Party 2012
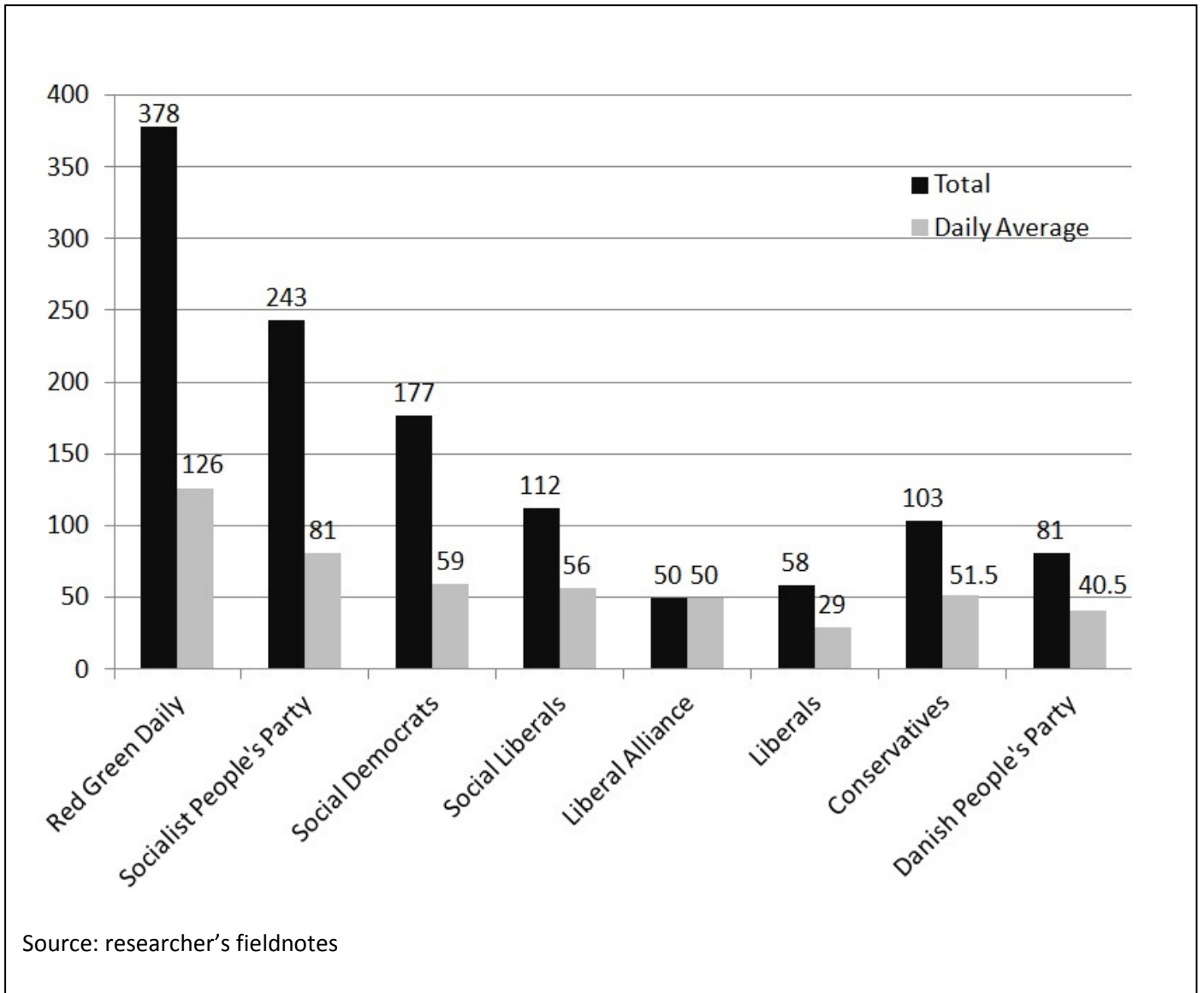
Figure 3: Total and daily average number of speeches



Source: researcher's fieldnotes

Figure 4: Types of speeches



Source: researcher's fieldnotes