



BRIEFING PAPER

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Social background of MPs 1979-2015

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Summary

This briefing paper provides data on the gender, age, ethnicity and occupational and educational backgrounds of Members of Parliament elected at the 2015 General Election and how this has changed since 1979:

- After the 2015 General Election there are 191 women MPs (29% of all MPs). This is the highest number ever. In 1979 there were 19 women MPs, 3% of the total.
- 53% (343) of those elected in 2015 were aged over 50. In the current Parliament the proportion of MPs aged 70 and over increased to nearly 4% (24). The number of MPs aged under 30 declined to 13 (2.0%), compared to 15 (2.3%) in 2010.
- Following the 2015 election, 6% of Members of Parliament are from non-white backgrounds. This compares with 13% of the UK population from a non-white background¹.
- Since 1979, the number of MPs who had been manual workers decreased from around 16% of all MPs in 1979 to 3% in 2015. The proportion of MPs with a background in one of the 'traditional' professions² has also fallen, from 45% in 1979 to 31% in 2015.
- One-third of MPs elected in 2015 went to fee-paying schools. Around three-quarters of MPs elected in 2015 are university graduates.
- Of those elected in 2015, 177 (27%) were new to the Parliament. 468 (72%) had been MPs in the previous 2010-15 Parliament, while five were elected in 2015 having previously served in Parliaments prior to 2010.

This briefing paper updates the [Social background of Members of Parliament SN/SG/1528](#) House of Commons Library standard note which comprises the data up to 2010. Data on UK elections prior to 1979 is available in the [UK Election Statistics: 1918-2012 12/43](#) research paper.

¹ 12.9% of the UK population were from a non-white background at the time of the 2011 Census. The share of UK population from a non-white background remained at 12.9% at the time of ONS' Annual Population Survey 2014-2015.

² The 'traditional' professions category includes: Barrister, Solicitor, Doctor/dentist, Architect/Surveyor, Civil/Chartrd Engineer, Accountant, Civil servant, Local Government official, Consultant, Scientist and Researcher - Cowley and Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2015*.

1. Gender

After the 2015 General Election there were 191 women MPs (29% of all MPs), the highest ever number and proportion. In 1979 there were 19 women MPs, 3% of the total. The number of women MPs rose slowly over the next three Parliaments to 60 in 1992. The 1997 Labour landslide was accompanied by a doubling of the number of women MPs to 120. That number fell back to 118 after the 2001 election but rose again in at subsequent general elections. Figures for the start of each of the last nine Parliaments are given in Table 1.

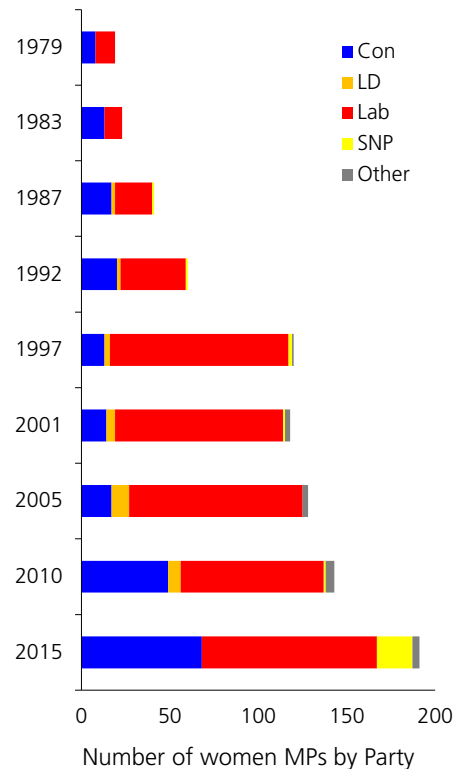
Table 1 Men and Women MPs 1979 to 2015

Election	Men	Women	Total	% women
1979	616	19	635	3%
1983	627	23	650	4%
1987	609	41	650	6%
1992	591	60	651	9%
1997	539	120	659	18%
2001	541	118	659	18%
2005	518	128	646	20%
2010	507	143	650	22%
2015	459	191	650	29%

As Table 2 shows, the largest share of female MPs has been for Labour MPs. This has particularly been the case since 1987.

Table 2: Women MPs by Party, 1979-2015

	LAB	CON	LD	SNP	Other
Number					
1979	11	8	0	0	0
1983	10	13	0	0	0
1987	21	17	2	1	0
1992	37	20	2	1	0
1997	101	13	3	2	1
2001	95	14	5	1	3
2005	98	17	10	0	3
2010	81	49	7	1	5
2015	99	68	0	20	4
Percentage					
1979	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%
1983	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%
1987	9%	5%	9%	33%	0%
1992	14%	6%	10%	33%	0%
1997	24%	8%	7%	33%	4%
2001	23%	8%	10%	20%	13%
2005	28%	9%	16%	0%	12%
2010	31%	16%	12%	17%	22%
2015	43%	21%	0%	36%	17%



Sources: *Kavanagh and Cowley, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions;*
House of Commons Library Briefing Papers SN01250, CBP7186

2. Age

In the period from 1979 to 2015, the average age of MPs at elections has been consistently around 50 years. From 1997 to 2005 the average age of MPs elected rose, from 49.3 years in 1997 to 51.2 years in 2005, before falling to 50.6 in 2015.

In 2015, 52.8% (343) of those elected were aged over 50. This is lower than in 2005 (56.2%), but higher than at the other general elections since 1979. The proportion of MPs aged 70 and over increased from 2.5% (16) in 2010 to 3.7% (24) in 2015 – the highest share since 1979. In the current Parliament, the number of MPs aged under 30 declined to 13 (2.0%), compared to 15 (2.3%) in 2010.

Table 3 Age of MPs at General Elections 1979 to 2015

Election	Average Age at election (Years)	Average Age at election (Years)						Total
		18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	
1979	49.6	6	120	205	203	87	14	635
1983	48.8	10	120	223	201	86	9	649
1987	49.0	4	112	252	197	79	6	650
1992	50.0	1	82	259	211	95	3	651
1997	49.3	10	92	255	225	69	8	659
2001	50.3	4	79	236	247	83	10	659
2005	51.2	3	89	191	249	100	14	646
2010	49.9	15	108	196	216	99	16	650
2015	50.6	13	89	205	212	107	24	650

Note: Age at the time of General Election

Source: House of Commons Library MP database

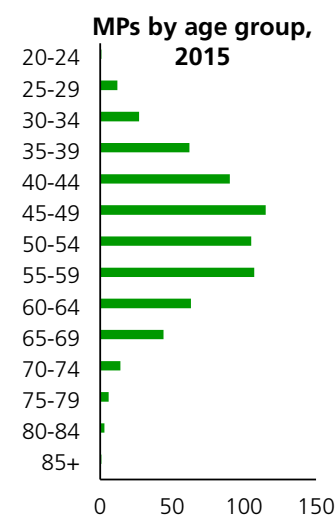
Of those elected at the 2015 General Election, on average, Labour MPs are older than those from the other largest parties. 29% of Labour MPs are aged over 60 compared to 15% of Conservatives, 13% of Liberal Democrats and 7% of Scottish National Party MPs. The average age for SNP MPs is 46, the lowest average for any of the four largest parties (those with 8 or more MPs).

Table 4 Age of MPs elected at the 2015 General Election by Party

	Number	Average age (years)	Average age (years)		
			Under 40	41-59	60+
LAB	232	52.5	18%	57%	25%
CON	330	49.8	17%	71%	12%
LD	8	51.9	0%	88%	13%
SNP	56	46.1	30%	63%	7%
Other	24	53.6	13%	58%	38%
<i>All</i>	<i>650</i>	<i>50.6</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>65%</i>	<i>17%</i>

Note: Age at the time of General Election

Source: House of Commons Library MP database



3. Ethnicity

As an individual’s ethnicity is self-defined, it is hard to obtain complete records of MPs’ ethnicity, particularly historically. It is generally stated that the first non-white MPs since World War II were elected in 1987, when four Labour MPs were from a non-white background.

Following the 2015 Election, 6.3% of Members of Parliament have been categorised as from non-white backgrounds. Around 12.9% of the UK population were from a non-white background at the time of the 2011 Census. The share of the UK population from non-white backgrounds remained at 12.9% at the time of the 2014-15 Annual Population Survey.

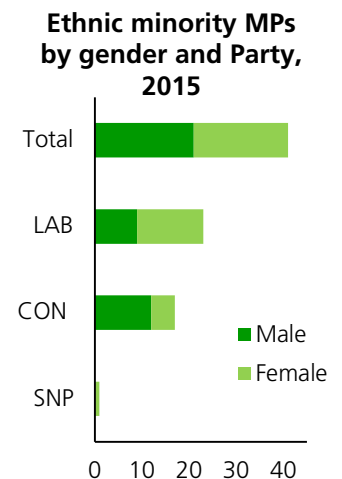
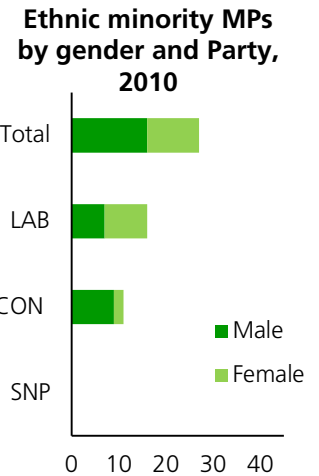
Table 5 Ethnicity of MPs elected at General Elections 1987 to 2015 by Party

	LAB	CON	LD	SNP	Other	Total
White						
1987	225	376	22	3	20	646
1992	266	335	20	3	21	645
1997	409	165	46	6	24	650
2001	400	166	52	5	24	647
2005	342	196	62	6	25	631
2010	242	295	57	6	23	623
2015	209	313	8	55	24	609
Non-white						
1987	4	0	0	0	0	4
1992	5	1	0	0	0	6
1997	9	0	0	0	0	9
2001	12	0	0	0	0	12
2005	13	2	0	0	0	15
2010	16	11	0	0	0	27
2015	23	17	0	1	0	41
Total						
1987	229	376	22	3	20	650
1992	271	336	20	3	21	651
1997	418	165	46	6	24	659
2001	412	166	52	5	24	659
2005	355	198	62	6	25	646
2010	258	306	57	6	23	650
2015	232	330	8	56	24	650

Source: House of Commons Library Research Papers 08/12, 10/36, CBP7186.

There have been no non-white Liberal Democrat MPs elected at general elections. Parmjit Singh Gill was elected for the Liberal Democrats at a by-election in 2004 in Leicester South, but he did not retain the seat at the 2005 General Election. The first non-white Scottish National Party MP was elected in 2015.

Of the ethnic minority MPs elected at the 2015 General Election there are 21 (51%) male and 20 (49%) female MPs, compared to 16 (59%) and 11 (41%) in 2010 respectively. Currently 29% (5) of ethnic minority Conservative MPs are female, compared to 61% (14) for Labour. There is currently one female ethnic minority SNP MP.



4. Occupation

The Nuffield Election studies provide analyses of occupations of candidates and MPs at each election. The historic data is restricted to Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, but gives a reasonably consistent guide to the occupational background of MPs over the period from 1979-2010³. The 2015 dataset also include Scottish National Party MPs. The following table summarises the proportion of MPs in main occupation groups.

Table 6 MPs' Occupations 1979 to 2015

MPs (Conservative/Labour/Liberal Democrat/Scottish National¹)

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015 ¹
<i>Number</i>									
Professions	278	278	262	258	272	270	242	218	194
Barrister	67	69	57	53	36	33	34	38	38
Solicitor	29	35	31	30	28	35	38	48	51
Doctor	8	5	5	6	9	8	6	9	10
Civil service/local govt	30	27	22	26	37	35	28	18	16
Teachers: University/college	28	32	36	45	61	53	44	25	16
Teacher: school	49	43	48	57	65	64	47	24	16
Business	138	162	161	152	113	107	118	156	192
Miscellaneous	106	115	133	154	188	200	217	222	221
White Collar	9	21	27	46	72	76	78	84	71
Politician/Political organiser	21	20	34	46	60	66	87	90	107
Publisher/Journalist	46	45	42	44	47	50	43	38	34
Farmer	23	21	19	12	7	6	8	10	7
Manual Workers	98	74	73	63	56	53	38	25	19
Miner	21	20	17	13	13	12	11	7	[7²]
Total	619	629	629	627	629	630	615	621	626
<i>Percentage</i>									
Professions	44.9%	44.2%	41.7%	41.1%	43.2%	42.9%	39.3%	35.1%	31.0%
Barrister	10.8%	11.0%	9.1%	8.5%	5.7%	5.2%	5.5%	6.1%	6.1%
Solicitor	4.7%	5.6%	4.9%	4.8%	4.5%	5.6%	6.2%	7.7%	8.1%
Doctor	1.3%	0.8%	0.8%	1.0%	1.4%	1.3%	1.0%	1.4%	1.6%
Civil service/local govt	4.8%	4.3%	3.5%	4.1%	5.9%	5.6%	4.6%	2.9%	2.6%
Teachers: University/college	4.5%	5.1%	5.7%	7.2%	9.7%	8.4%	7.2%	4.0%	2.6%
Teacher: school	7.9%	6.8%	7.6%	9.1%	10.3%	10.2%	7.6%	3.9%	2.6%
Business	22.3%	25.8%	25.6%	24.2%	18.0%	17.0%	19.2%	25.1%	30.7%
Miscellaneous	17.1%	18.3%	21.1%	24.6%	29.9%	31.7%	35.3%	35.7%	35.3%
White Collar ³	1.5%	3.3%	4.3%	7.3%	11.4%	12.1%	12.7%	13.5%	11.3%
Politician/Political organiser	3.4%	3.2%	5.4%	7.3%	9.5%	10.5%	14.1%	14.5%	17.1%
Publisher/Journalist	7.4%	7.2%	6.7%	7.0%	7.5%	7.9%	7.0%	6.1%	5.4%
Farmer	3.7%	3.3%	3.0%	1.9%	1.1%	1.0%	1.3%	1.6%	1.1%
Manual Workers	15.8%	11.8%	11.6%	10.0%	8.9%	8.4%	6.2%	4.0%	3.0%
Miner	3.4%	3.2%	2.7%	2.1%	2.1%	1.9%	1.8%	1.1%	[1.1%]

Notes: 1. Scottish National Party data is only included from 2015;
 2. The number of former miners is not recorded in the *British General Election of 2015*. The number for 2015 based on the House of Commons Library calculations.
 3. From 2010, Nuffield study categories: 'White collar' includes: misc. white collar; union official; public relations; and charity/voluntary sector;

Sources: *Kavanagh, Cowley et al The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*

Since 1979 the number of MPs who were former manual workers decreased from around 16% of all MPs in 1979 to 3% in 2015. The proportion of MPs with a background in one of the 'traditional' professions⁴ has also fallen, from 45% in 1979 to 31% in 2015. Within

³ In the period from 1951 to 2010 on average 97% of all elected MPs represented Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties (including predecessors).

⁴ The 'traditional' professions category is listed in - Cowley and Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2015*.

this category the proportion of former school teachers and former barristers has declined while the proportion of former solicitors has risen. The numbers of teachers from schools and teachers from universities and colleges were rising until 1997. In the period from 2001 to 2015 it has fallen below the 1979 level.

As the established professions have declined they have been replaced by MPs from other non-manual occupations. Particularly notable is the growth in the number of MPs who come to Westminster already with previous political experience. In 1979 3% of MPs from the main parties were previously politicians/political organisers, compared to 17% in 2015.

MPs with a background in business tend to be Conservative. The decline in their number was reversed in 2005 and they now form a quarter of the main parties' MPs.

Table 7 Occupation of MPs elected at the 2015 General Election by Party

	Number				Percentage			
	CON	LAB	LD	SNP	CON	LAB	LD	SNP
Professions	107	64	6	17	32%	28%	75%	30%
Solicitor	28	17	2	4	8%	7%	25%	7%
Barrister	28	9	0	1	8%	4%	0%	2%
Teachers: University/college	1	12	0	3	0%	5%	0%	5%
Teacher: school	5	7	2	2	2%	3%	25%	4%
Civil service/local govt	2	10	2	2	1%	4%	25%	4%
Accountant	14	1	0	1	4%	0%	0%	2%
Armed services	12	1	0	0	4%	0%	0%	0%
Doctor/dentist/optician	8	0	0	2	2%	0%	0%	4%
Business	145	26	2	19	44%	11%	25%	34%
Miscellaneous	75	126	0	20	23%	54%	0%	36%
Politician/Political organiser	40	59	0	8	12%	25%	0%	14%
Publisher/Journalist	16	14	0	4	5%	6%	0%	7%
Public relations	6	3	0	1	2%	1%	0%	2%
Manual Workers	3	16	0	0	1%	7%	0%	0%
Total	330	232	8	56	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Kavanagh and Cowley, *The British General Election of 2015*

5. Education

One-third of current MPs elected in 2015 went to fee-paying schools. The proportion varies by party from 7% of Scottish National Party, to 13% of Liberal Democrats, 16% Labour, and 50% of Conservatives. By comparison, 7% of pupils in UK schools are in independent (fee-paying) schools.⁵ Around three-quarters of MPs elected in 2015 were university graduates.

Since 1979, the main change in terms of educational background of MPs has been the rising proportion who have been to non-Oxbridge universities. In 1979, 225 MPs elected from the 3 main parties had been to Oxford or Cambridge, 36% of these parties' MPs. At the 2015 election, 150 MPs elected representing the largest UK parties (23%) had an Oxbridge background.

⁵ At January 2015; DfE [Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2015](#)

Table 8 Education of MPs elected in General Elections 1979 to 2015

		<i>% attending educational institution</i>								
		1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015
CON	Fee-paying school	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%	54%	50%
	University	68%	71%	70%	73%	81%	83%	81%	80%	81%
	<i>Oxford / Cambridge</i>	49%	48%	44%	45%	51%	48%	43%	34%	30%
LAB	Fee-paying school	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%	14%	16%
	University	59%	53%	56%	61%	66%	67%	64%	72%	77%
	<i>Oxford / Cambridge</i>	21%	15%	15%	16%	15%	16%	16%	17%	21%
LD	Fee-paying school	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%	39%	13%
	University	45%	65%	73%	75%	70%	69%	79%	81%	100%
	<i>Oxford / Cambridge</i>	27%	30%	27%	30%	33%	27%	31%	28%	13%
SNP	Fee-paying school									7%
	University									75%
	<i>Oxford / Cambridge</i>									0%

Source: Kavanagh, Cowley et al *The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*

6. Parliamentary Experience

Of those elected in 2015, 177 (27%) had no previous Parliamentary experience. 468 (72%) had been MPs in the 2010-15 Parliament, while 5 were elected in 2015 having served in Parliaments prior to 2015, but not in the 2010-15 Parliament.

Table 9 Current MPs by first election date and Party

	CON	LAB	LD	SNP	Other	Total
Number of MPs elected by general election (includes by-elections before next general election)						
1966	0	1	0	0	0	1
1970	2	3	0	0	0	5
1974 Oct	0	1	0	0	0	1
1979	1	3	0	0	0	4
1983	12	5	0	0	0	17
1987	8	9	0	1	0	18
1992	15	10	0	0	0	25
1997	20	40	1	0	2	63
2001	18	18	3	3	5	47
2005	46	29	4	2	5	86
2010	134	51	0	1	5	191
2015-present	74	62	0	49	7	192
Total:	330	232	8	56	24	650
% of MPs elected by general election (includes by-elections before next general election)						
1966	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
1970	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
1974 Oct	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
1979	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
1983	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%	3%
1987	2%	4%	0%	2%	0%	3%
1992	5%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%
1997	6%	17%	13%	0%	8%	10%
2001	5%	8%	38%	5%	21%	7%
2005	14%	13%	50%	4%	21%	13%
2010	41%	22%	0%	2%	21%	29%
2015-present	22%	27%	0%	88%	29%	30%
Total:	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: MPs elected at by-elections are categorised by the first general election at which they were elected.

Sources: House of Commons Library MP database,

In the current Parliament, Kenneth Clarke, Sir Gerald Kaufman and Dennis Skinner share the longest length of service 44.8 Years, excluding dissolution periods⁶. All of them have been MPs continuously since the 1970 General Election. However, Sir Gerald Kaufman is the current Father of the House⁷. They are followed by Sir Alan Haselhurst with 41.5 years of service as an MP and David Winnick with 40.2 years (to 31 December 2015).

Since 1979, the shortest service has been by MPs who won by-elections. Two Members subsequently died; Bobby Sands (Fermanagh & South Tyrone) 26 days after election and Mike Carr (Bootle) after 57 days. Ossie O'Brien (Darlington) was elected at a by-election but defeated 77 days later at the 1983 General Election.

Table 10: Top 25 MPs by total days of service not including Dissolution periods ^{1,2}

Rank	Name of MP:	Days in service	Years in service	Party	Length of service
1	Clarke, Kenneth	16,358	44.8	CON	
2	Kaufman, Sir Gerald	16,358	44.8	LAB	
3	Skinner, Dennis	16,358	44.8	LAB	
4	Haselhurst, Sir Alan	15,153	41.5	CON	
5	Winnick, David	14,703	40.2	LAB	
6	Bottomley, Sir Peter	14,564	39.8	CON	
7	Robinson, Geoffrey	14,312	39.2	LAB	
8	Beckett, Margaret	13,352	36.5	LAB	
9	Field, Frank	13,183	36.1	LAB	
10	Sheerman, Barry	13,183	36.1	LAB	
11	Harman, Harriet	11,909	32.6	LAB	
12	Amess, David	11,712	32.0	CON	
13	Barron, Kevin	11,712	32.0	LAB	
14	Brown, Nicholas	11,712	32.0	LAB	
15	Corbyn, Jeremy	11,712	32.0	LAB	
16	Gale, Sir Roger	11,712	32.0	CON	
17	Leigh, Sir Edward	11,712	32.0	CON	
18	Lilley, Peter	11,712	32.0	CON	
19	Soames, Sir Nicholas	11,712	32.0	CON	
20	Cash, William	11,383	31.1	CON	
21	Clwyd, Ann	11,383	31.1	LAB	
22	McLoughlin, Patrick	10,648	29.1	CON	
23	Howarth, George	10,459	28.6	LAB	
24	Abbott, Diane	10,273	28.1	LAB	
25	Allen, Graham	10,273	28.1	LAB	

Note: 1. The length of service does not include the Parliament dissolution periods and is estimated as of 31 December 2015.

2. The data in the table covers: continuous and dis-continuous service

Source: House of Commons Library MP database,

⁶ The dissolution period is the time between the end of a Parliament and the subsequent General Election.

⁷ In the situation when several MPs share the longest continuous service the Father of the House is considered to be the MP who took their Oath first.

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