



BRIEFING PAPER

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Social background of MPs 1979-2017

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Inside:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Ethnicity
4. Parliamentary Experience
5. Education
6. Occupation



Contents

Summary	3
1. Gender	4
2. Age	5
3. Ethnicity	6
4. Parliamentary Experience	8
5. Education	10
5.1 Sutton Trust estimates	10
5.2 <i>British General Election of 2015</i> and previous years	10
5.3 Trends	11
6. Occupation	12

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Summary

This briefing paper provides data on the gender, age, ethnicity and educational backgrounds of Members of Parliament elected at the 2017 General Election and how this has changed since 1979. Data on occupational background is currently available up to 2015; a further update will be provided when 2017 data becomes available.

- There were 208 female MPs elected at the 2017 General Election (32% of all MPs). This is the highest ever number and proportion. In 1979 there were 19 women MPs, 3% of the total.
- 52% (339) of MPs elected in 2017 were aged over 50. Following the election, the proportion of MPs aged 70 and over increased to 4% (28). 14 MPs aged under 30 were elected (2% of the total).
- 52 MPs were from non-white backgrounds, 8% of the total. Around 14% of the whole UK population are from a non-white background.
- The Sutton Trust estimates that 29% of MPs elected at the 2017 General Election attended private schools and 23% attended Oxford or Cambridge.
- 87 MPs elected in 2017 had no previous Parliamentary experience (13%). 551 (65%) had been MPs in the previous Parliament and 12 were re-elected having served in a previous Parliament.

Data on UK elections prior to 1979 is available in the [UK Election Statistics: 1918-2012 12/43](#) research paper.

1. Gender

There were 208 female MPs elected at the 2017 General Election (32% of all MPs) – the highest ever number and proportion. There were 19 female MPs in 1979, 3% of the total. The number of female MPs rose slowly over the next three parliaments to 60 in 1992. With the 1997 Labour landslide, the number of women MPs doubled to 120. That number fell back to 118 after the 2001 election but rose again in at subsequent general elections.

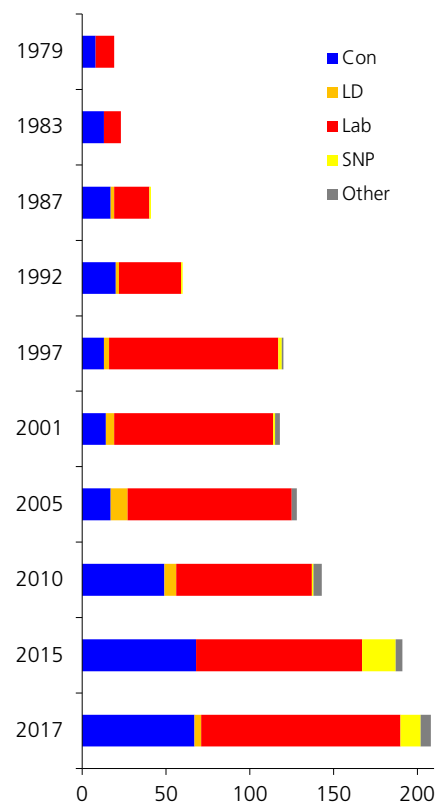
Table 1: Men and women MPs 1979 to 2017

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%
2017	442	208	650	32%

As Table 2 shows, Labour have tended to have the highest number of female MPs, and have had the highest proportion since 2001.

Table 2: Women MPs by party, 1979-2017

	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
2017	119	67	4	12	6
Percentage of party MPs					
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%
2017	45%	21%	33%	34%	25%



Sources: *Kavanagh and Cowley, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions;*

House of Commons Library, General Election 2017: full results and analysis

2. Age

In the period from 1979 to 2017, 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 50.5 in 2017.

In 2017, 52.2% (339) of those elected were aged over 50. This is lower than in 2005 (56.2%), and very similar to in 2015 (52.8%). The proportion of MPs aged 70 and over increased from 2.5% (16) in 2010 to 4.3% (28) in 2017 – the highest share since 1979. In the current Parliament, the number of MPs aged under 30 increased to 14 (2.2%), the highest proportion ever other than 15 in 2010 (2.3%).

Table 3: Age of MPs at General Elections 1979 to 2017

Election	Average Age at election (Years)	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Not specified	Total
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
2017	50.5	14	102	190	197	114	28	5	650

Notes: Age given at the date of the general election. Publicly-available data sources were used where dates of birth were not available from the House of Commons Members' Names Information Service. In some cases, ages are approximate (e.g. based on a birth year or month rather than a specific day).

Source: House of Commons Library, *Members' Names Information Service*; Library research.

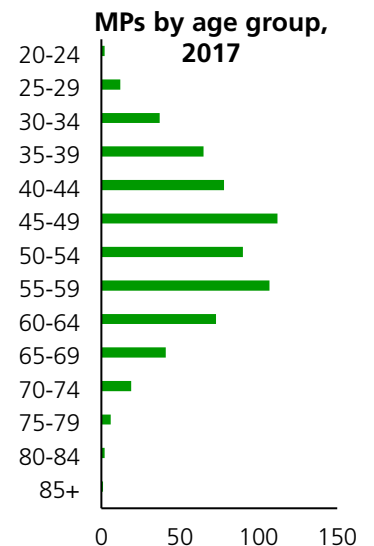
The Labour party tends to have a higher proportion of MPs over the age of 60. 27% of Labour MPs are aged over 60 compared to 19% of Conservatives, 17% of Liberal Democrats and 9% of Scottish National Party MPs. The average age for SNP MPs is 46, the lowest average for any of the four largest parties (those with 8 or more MPs).

Table 4: Age of MPs elected at the 2017 General Election by party

	Number	Average age (years)	Average age			Unknown
			Under 40	40-59	60+	
LAB	262	51.6	20%	52%	27%	2%
CON	317	49.9	14%	67%	19%	0%
LD	12	53.5	17%	67%	17%	0%
SNP	35	46.0	31%	60%	9%	0%
Other	24	51.2	21%	50%	29%	0%
<i>All</i>	<i>650</i>		<i>18%</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>1%</i>

Notes: See Table 3, above. Data was not available for four Labour MPs and one Conservative MP.

Source: House of Commons Library, *Members' Names Information Service*; Library research.



3. Ethnicity

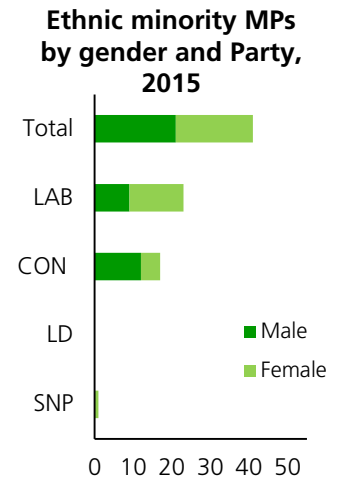
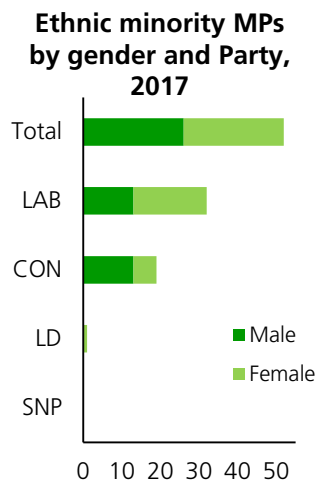
As an individual’s ethnicity is self-defined, it is hard to obtain complete records of MPs’ ethnicity, particularly historically. It is generally stated that the first non-white MPs since World War II were elected in 1987, when four Labour MPs were from a non-white background.

52 non-white MPs were elected at the 2017 General Election, according to analysis from [British Future](#). This represents 8% of all MPs and is the highest number and proportion of ethnic minority MPs returned at a general election to date.

Around 13.6% of people in the UK were from an ethnic minority group at the time of the 2016 Annual Population Survey.¹

Table 5: Ethnicity of MPs elected at General Elections 1987 to 2017 by party

	LAB	CON	LD	SNP	Other	Total
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
2017	32	19	1	0	0	52
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
2017	230	298	11	35	24	598
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
2017	262	317	12	35	24	650



Source: House of Commons Library, [General Election 2017: results and analysis](#); British Future, [52 minority MPs to sit in ‘most diverse UK parliament ever’](#), 9 June 2017

The gender split of ethnic minority MPs elected at the 2017 General Election is exactly even: 26 are male and 26 are female. 19 (59%) of Labour ethnic minority MPs are female, compared to 13 (32%) of Conservative ethnic minority MPs.

¹ Annual Population Survey, Q1 2016 – Q4 2016 dataset

7 Social background of MPs 1979-2017

The Liberal Democrats gained one female ethnic minority MP, Layla Moran. She is the first non-white Liberal Democrat to be elected at a general election (Parmjit Singh Gill was elected for the Liberal Democrats at a 2004 by-election, but did not retain the seat in the 2005 General Election).

The first ethnic minority SNP MP, Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, was elected in 2015. She did not retain her seat in 2017.

4. Parliamentary Experience

Of MPs elected in 2017, 87 (13%) had no previous Parliamentary experience. 551 (85%) had been MPs in the 2015-17 Parliament, while 12 were re-elected having served in a previous Parliament.

Table 6: Current MPs by first general election date and party

	CON	LAB	SNP	LD	Other	Total
Number of MPs elected by general election (includes by-elections before next general election)						
1970	1	1	0	0	0	2
1974 (Oct)	1	2	0	0	0	3
1979	0	4	0	0	0	4
1983	12	6	0	0	0	18
1987	4	5	0	0	0	9
1992	13	11	0	0	0	24
1997	19	41	0	3	2	65
2001	14	13	1	2	5	35
2005	46	23	2	2	2	75
2010	112	56	0	1	6	175
2015	65	54	31	0	3	153
2017	30	46	1	4	6	87
Total:	317	262	35	12	24	650
% of MPs elected by general election (includes by-elections before next general election)						
1970	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
1974 (Oct)	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
1979	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%
1983	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%	3%
1987	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%
1992	4%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%
1997	6%	16%	0%	25%	8%	10%
2001	4%	5%	3%	17%	21%	5%
2005	15%	9%	6%	17%	8%	12%
2010	35%	21%	0%	8%	25%	27%
2015	21%	21%	89%	0%	13%	24%
2017	9%	18%	3%	33%	25%	13%
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, Members Names Information Service

In the current Parliament, Kenneth Clarke and Dennis Skinner share the longest length of service (46.1 years excluding dissolution periods). Both have been MPs continuously since the 1970 General Election. However, Kenneth Clarke is the current Father of the House.² They are followed by Sir Peter Bottomley (41.2 years of service) and Geoffrey Robinson (40.5 years of service).

² 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.

9 Social background of MPs 1979-2017

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 7: The 25 longest-serving MPs

Rank	Name of MP:	Days in service ^a	Years in service ^a	First started	Party
1	Clarke, Mr Kenneth	16,847	46.1	1970	CON
2	Skinner, Mr Dennis	16,847	46.1	1970	LAB
3	Bottomley, Sir Peter	15,053	41.2	1975	CON
4	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey	14,801	40.5	1976	LAB
5	Beckett, Margaret	13,841	37.9	1974	LAB
6	Field, Frank	13,672	37.4	1979	LAB
7	Sheerman, Mr Barry	13,672	37.4	1979	LAB
8	Harman, Ms Harriet	12,398	33.9	1982	LAB
9	Amess, Sir David	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
10	Barron, Sir Kevin	12,201	33.4	1983	LAB
11	Brown, Mr Nicholas	12,201	33.4	1983	LAB
12	Corbyn, Jeremy	12,201	33.4	1983	LAB
13	Gale, Sir Roger	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
14	Leigh, Sir Edward	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
15	Soames, Sir Nicholas	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
16	Cash, Sir William	11,872	32.5	1984	CON
17	Clwyd, Ann	11,872	32.5	1984	LAB
18	McLoughlin, Sir Patrick	11,137	30.5	1986	CON
19	Howarth, Mr George	10,948	30.0	1986	LAB
20	Abbott, Ms Diane	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB
21	Campbell, Mr Ronnie	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB
22	Flynn, Paul	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB
23	Redwood, John	10,762	29.5	1987	CON
24	Tredinnick, David	10,762	29.5	1987	CON
25	Vaz, Keith	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB

Notes: (a) 'Days /years in service' does not include the Parliament dissolution periods and is estimated as at the dissolution of the 2015-17 Parliament.

Source: House of Commons Library, Members Names Information Service

5. Education

There are two main sources of data on the educational background of MPs: the Sutton Trust and the *British General Election of...* series of books.³ The Sutton Trust have released their data for 2017, while *The British General Election of 2017* has not yet been published.

5.1 Sutton Trust estimates

The table below summarises the Sutton Trust's estimates for the 2017 General Election. The analysis covers 649 of the 650 MPs elected.⁴ It covers the school background of 96% of MPs and the university background of 98% of MPs. MPs who were educated abroad were not included in their analysis.

Conservative MPs were most likely to have attended private school: 45% did compared to 29% of all MPs. They were also more likely to have attended university at Oxford or Cambridge (31% compared to 23% of all MPs). SNP MPs were least likely to have attended a private or selective school (88% attended a comprehensive school). None of the SNP MPs for whom data was available attended Oxford or Cambridge.

Table 8: School and university background of MPs elected in 2017
Sutton Trust estimates

	Private school	State school		Oxbridge
		Comprehensive	Selective	
CON	45%	38%	17%	31%
LAB	14%	67%	18%	20%
SNP	6%	88%	6%	0%
LD	27%	56%	11%	17%
All MPs	29%	51%	18%	23%

Source: Sutton Trust, [Parliamentary privilege – the MPs in 2017](#)

5.2 British General Election of 2015 and previous years

The British General Election of 2015 and previous editions looks at the educational background of MPs returned at each election. The 2017 edition has not yet been published.

One-third of MPs elected in 2015 went to fee-paying schools. The proportion varied 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 were in independent (fee-paying) schools at January 2015.⁵ Around three-quarters of MPs elected in 2015 were university graduates.

³ Kavanagh, Cowley et al, *The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*.

⁴ Because the analysis was produced shortly after the election it does not include data for Emma Dent Coad, whose seat (Kensington) was declared later than the others.

⁵ Department for Education, [Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2015](#)

Table 9: 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*

5.3 Trends

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. Around 23% of MPs elected at the 2017 election came from an Oxbridge background.

6. Occupation

The *British General Election of...* series of books provide analyses of occupations of candidates and MPs at each election.⁶ The 2017 edition has not yet been published.

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 1979-2010.⁷ The 2015 dataset also includes Scottish National Party MPs. The following table summarises the main occupation groups of MPs elected up to 2015.

Table 10: MPs' former occupations 1979 to 2015

MPs (Conservative/Labour/Liberal Democrat/Scottish National ¹)	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*

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

⁶ Kavanagh, Cowley et al, *The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*.

⁷ In the period from 1951 to 2010 on average 97% of all elected MPs represented Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties (including predecessors).

with a background in one of the 'traditional' professions⁸ has also fallen, from 45% in 1979 to 31% in 2015. Within 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 fell 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 11: 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*

⁸ The 'traditional' professions category is listed in - Cowley and Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2015*.

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