



Social background of MPs

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This note provides data on the sex, age, ethnicity and occupational and educational backgrounds of Members of Parliament elected at the 2010 General Election and how this has changed since 1979.

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1.1 Gender

In 2010, there are 143 women MPs (22% 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 (it rose during the 97-01 Parliament to 122 following the election of two women at by-elections). That number fell back to 118 after the 2001 election but rose again in 2005 and 2010. Figures for the start of each of the last eight Parliaments are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Men and Women MPs 1979 to 2010

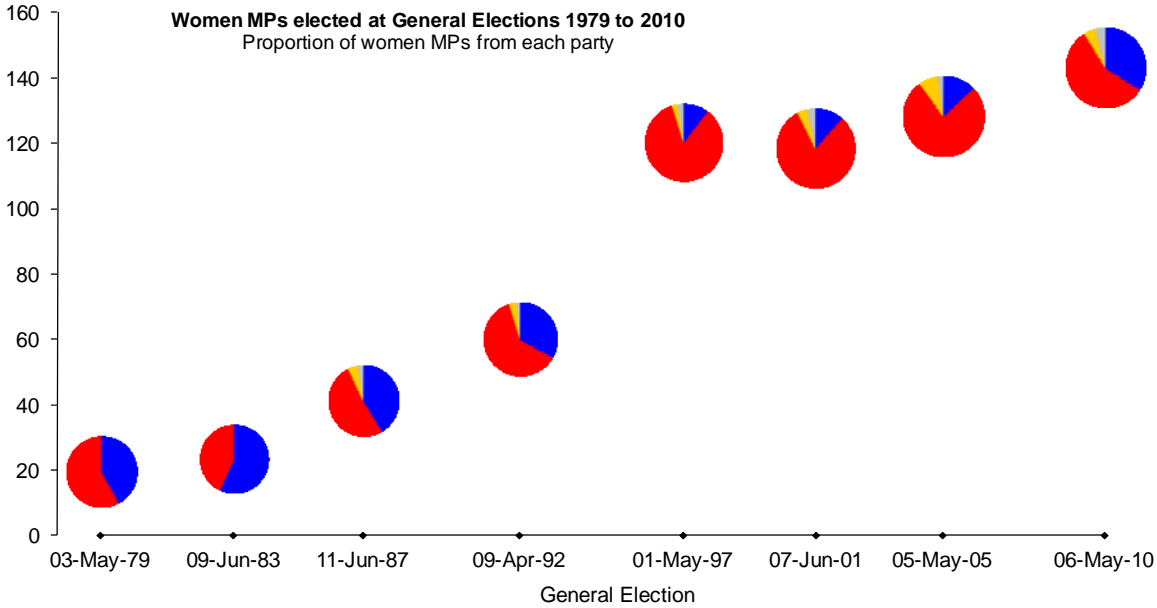
Election	Men	Women	Total	% women
1979	616	19	635	3%
1983	627	23	650	4%
1987	609	41	650	6%
1992	591	60	651	9%
1997	539	120	659	18%
2001	541	118	659	18%
2005	518	128	646	20%
2010	507	143	650	22%

As Table 2 and Figure 1 show, the majority of female MPs have been Labour MPs. This has particularly been the case since 1997.

Table 2 Women MPs by party 1979 to 2010

	Number				% of party total			
	LAB	CON	LD	Other	LAB	CON	LD	Other
1979	11	8	0	0	4%	2%	0%	0%
1983	10	13	0	0	5%	3%	0%	0%
1987	21	17	1	2	9%	5%	5%	8%
1992	37	20	2	1	14%	6%	10%	4%
1997	101	13	3	3	24%	8%	7%	10%
2001	95	14	5	4	23%	8%	10%	14%
2005	98	17	10	3	28%	9%	16%	10%
2010	81	49	7	6	31%	16%	12%	21%

Figure 1 Women MPs 1979 to 2010



1.2 Age

The average age of MPs has been remarkably consistent since 1979, at 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 49.9 in 2010.

In 2010, 51% (331) of those elected were aged over 50. This is lower than in 2001 (52%) and 2005 (56%), but higher than at the other general elections since 1979. The spread in the ages of MPs was greater in 2010 than in previous years – in particular, there are 15 MPs aged less than 30 and 16 MPs aged 70 and over in 2010.

Table 3 Age of MPs at General Elections 1979 to 2010

Election	Average Age at election date	Age Group						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

Of those elected at the 2010 General Election, on average Labour MPs are older than those from the other major parties. 85% of Labour MPs are aged over 40 compared to 77% of Conservative MPs and 79% of Liberal Democrat MPs.

Table 4 Age of MPs elected at 2010 General Election by party

	Number	Average age (years)			
		Under 40	40-59	60+	
LAB	258	52.3	15%	59%	26%
CON	306	47.7	23%	67%	10%
LD	57	50.2	21%	58%	21%
Other	29	50.7	10%	72%	17%
<i>All</i>	650	51.2	19%	63%	18%

1.3 Ethnicity

An individual's ethnicity is self-defined. Consequently, 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 2010 election, 4.2% of Members of Parliament are from non-white backgrounds. This compares with the 8% of the UK population who were from a non-white background at the time of the 2001 Census of Population.

Table 5 Ethnicity of MPs elected at General Elections 1987 to 2010

	LAB	CON	LD	Other	Total
White					
1987	225	376	22	23	646
1992	266	335	20	24	645
1997	409	165	46	30	650
2001	400	166	52	29	647
2005	342	196	62	31	631
2010	242	295	57	29	623
Non-white					
1987	4	0	0	0	4
1992	5	1	0	0	6
1997	9	0	0	0	9
2001	12	0	0	0	12
2005	13	2	0	0	15
2010	16	11	0	0	27
Total					
1987	229	376	22	23	650
1992	271	336	20	24	651
1997	418	165	46	30	659
2001	412	166	52	29	659
2005	355	198	62	31	646
2010	258	306	57	29	650

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

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.

1.4 Occupation

The Nuffield election studies provide analyses of occupations of candidates and MPs elected at each election. These data are restricted to the three main parties but give a reasonably consistent guide to the occupational background of MPs over the period. The following table summarises the proportions in main occupation groups:

Table 6 MPs' Occupations 1979 to 2010

MPs from main parties (Conservative/Labour/Liberal Democrat)

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

Source: Butler, Kavanagh, Cowley et al *The British General Election of 2010 & previous editions*

Since 1979 there has been a large decrease in the number of MPs who were formerly manual workers, from around 16% of all MPs in 1979 to 4% in 2010. The proportion of MPs with professional backgrounds has also fallen, from 45% in 1979 to 35% in 2010. 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 since then have fallen back to below 1979 levels.

As the 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 a political background. In 1979 3% of MPs from the main parties were previously politicians/political organisers, compared to 14% in 2010.

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

Table 7 Occupation of MPs elected at the 2010 General Election

	Number			Percentage		
	CON	LAB	LD	CON	LAB	LD
Professions	107	89	22	35%	34%	39%
Solicitor	29	17	2	9%	7%	4%
Barrister	27	9	2	9%	3%	4%
Teachers: University/college	0	21	4	0%	8%	7%
Teacher: school	4	14	6	1%	5%	11%
Civil service/local govt	2	13	3	1%	5%	5%
Accountant	13	2	2	4%	1%	4%
Armed services	15	1	0	5%	0%	0%
Doctor/dentist/optician	6	2	1	2%	1%	2%
Business	125	20	11	41%	8%	19%
Miscellaneous	72	127	23	24%	49%	40%
Politician/Political organiser	31	52	7	10%	20%	12%
Publisher/Journalist	18	15	5	6%	6%	9%
Public relations	11	3	2	4%	1%	4%
Manual Workers	2	22	1	1%	9%	2%
Total	306	258	57	100%	100%	100%

Source: Kavanagh and Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*

1.5 Education

Over one third of current MPs have been to fee-paying schools. The proportion varies by party, from 14% of Labour MPs to 39% of Liberal Democrat MPs, to 54% of Conservative MPs. By comparison, 9% of pupils aged 11 and over in UK schools are in non-maintained (fee-paying) schools.¹ Around three quarters of MPs elected in 2010 were university graduates.

Table 8 Education of MPs elected in General Elections 1979 to 2010 (3 main parties)

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

Source: Butler, Kavanagh, Cowley et al *The British General Election of 2010 & previous editions*

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 2010 election, 165 MPs elected from the 3 main parties (27%) had an Oxbridge background.

1.6 Parliamentary Experience

Of those elected in 2010, 227 (35%) had no previous parliamentary experience. 418 (64%) had been MPs in the previous 2005-10 parliament, while 5 were elected in 2010 having previously served in parliaments prior to 2005, but not in the 2005-10 parliament.

Since 1979, the Member with longest service as an MP was Sir Edward Heath with 51.3 years. He is followed by Sir Peter Tapsell with 49.7 years of service as an MP (to 14 December 2010) and Tony Benn with 47.8 years.

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.

¹ At January 2010; DfE *Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2010*

Table 9 Length of Parliamentary service of current MPs by party

	CON	LAB	LD	Other	Total
By general election (includes by-elections before next general election)					
1959	1	0	0	0	1
1964	0	0	0	0	0
1966	0	1	0	0	1
1970	2	3	1	0	6
Feb 1974	3	0	0	0	3
Oct 1974	1	3	0	0	4
1979	2	7	1	0	10
1983	18	9	3	2	32
1987	9	20	1	0	30
1992	21	26	2	1	50
1997	26	59	13	3	101
2001	22	30	9	9	70
2005	54	37	17	7	115
2010	147	63	10	7	227
Total	306	258	57	29	650
Summaries					
Pre-1979	7	7	1	0	15
1979 - pre-1997	50	62	7	3	122
1997 - pre-2001	26	59	13	3	101
2001 - pre-2005	22	30	9	9	70
2005 - pre-2010	54	37	17	7	115
2010	147	63	10	7	227
Total	306	258	57	29	650
<i>of which at by-elections</i>	10	30	5	0	45
Summaries (% of those elected in 2010)					
Pre-1979	2%	3%	2%	0%	2%
1979 - pre-1997	16%	24%	12%	10%	19%
1997 - pre-2001	8%	23%	23%	10%	16%
2001 - pre-2005	7%	12%	16%	31%	11%
2005 - pre-2010	18%	14%	30%	24%	18%
2010	48%	24%	18%	24%	35%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>of which at by-elections</i>	3%	12%	9%	0%	7%