



Social background of MPs

Standard Note: 1528

Last updated: 4 June 2009

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Section: Social & General Statistics Section

This note provides data on the age, sex, ethnicity and occupational and educational backgrounds of Members of Parliament elected at the 2005 General Election and how this has changed since 1979.

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1.1 Age

The average age of MPs has been remarkably consistent since 1979, at around 50 years. Since 1997, the average age of MPs elected has risen, from 49.3 years in 1997 to 51.2 years in 2005. In 2005 56% (363) of those elected were aged over 50, compared with 48% (319) in 1992, and 47% (302) in 1997. The 14 MPs aged over 70 elected in 2005 was higher than at any previous election since 1979, when it had also been 14.

Table 1 Age of MPs at General Elections 1979 to 2005

Election year	Average Age at election date	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	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

Of those elected at the 2005 General Election, Labour MPs are older, on average than those from the other major parties. 90% of Labour MPs are aged over 40; compared to 83% of Conservative and 69% of Liberal Democrat.

Table 2 Age of MPs elected at 2005 General Election by party

	Number	Average age (years)	Under 40	41-59	60+
Lab	355	52.7	10%	71%	19%
Con	198	49.9	17%	65%	18%
LibDem	62	46.5	31%	60%	10%
Other	31	51.3	13%	77%	10%
All	646	51.2	14%	68%	18%

1.2 Gender

In 1979 there were 19 women MPs, 3% of all MPs. 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 to 128 after the 2005 General Election. This means that, women now make up 20%, 1 in 5, of all MPs. This is the highest ever proportion.

Table 3 shows the figures for the start of each of the last seven Parliaments:

Table 3 Men and Women MPs 1979 to 2005

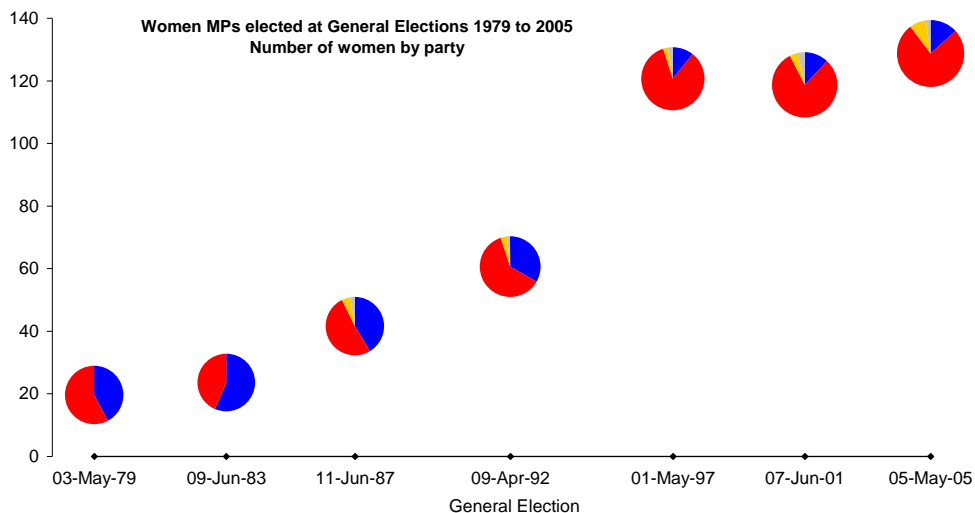
Election	Male	Female	Total	Female % of all
1979	616	19	635	3%
1983	627	23	650	4%
1987	609	41	650	6%
1992	591	60	651	9%
1997	539	120	659	18%
2001	541	118	659	18%
2005	518	128	646	20%

As Table 4 and Figure 1 show, the majority of female MPs are Labour MPs and this has especially been the case since 1997.

Table 4 Women MPs by party 1979 to 2005

	Number				Percentage of party total			
	Lab	Con	LibDem	Other	Lab	Con	LibDem	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%

Figure 1 Women MPs 1979 to 2005



1.3 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 the main groups:

Table 5 MPs' Occupations 1979 to 2005

% of all from main parties (Conservative/Labour/Liberal Democrat)

	Number							Percent						
	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Professions	278	278	262	258	272	270	242	44.9%	44.2%	41.7%	41.1%	43.2%	42.9%	39.3%
Barrister	67	69	57	53	36	33	34	10.8%	11.0%	9.1%	8.5%	5.7%	5.2%	5.5%
Solicitor	29	35	31	30	28	35	38	4.7%	5.6%	4.9%	4.8%	4.5%	5.6%	6.2%
Doctor	8	5	5	6	9	8	6	1.3%	0.8%	0.8%	1.0%	1.4%	1.3%	1.0%
Civil service/local govt	30	27	22	26	37	35	28	4.8%	4.3%	3.5%	4.1%	5.9%	5.6%	4.6%
Teachers: University/college	28	32	36	45	61	53	44	4.5%	5.1%	5.7%	7.2%	9.7%	8.4%	7.2%
Teacher: school	49	43	48	57	65	64	47	7.9%	6.8%	7.6%	9.1%	10.3%	10.2%	7.6%
Business	138	162	161	152	113	107	118	22.3%	25.8%	25.6%	24.2%	18.0%	17.0%	19.2%
Miscellaneous	106	115	133	154	188	200	217	17.1%	18.3%	21.1%	24.6%	29.9%	31.7%	35.3%
White Collar	9	21	27	46	72	76	78	1.5%	3.3%	4.3%	7.3%	11.4%	12.1%	12.7%
Politician/Pol organiser	21	20	34	46	60	66	87	3.4%	3.2%	5.4%	7.3%	9.5%	10.5%	14.1%
Publisher/Journalist	46	45	42	44	47	50	43	7.4%	7.2%	6.7%	7.0%	7.5%	7.9%	7.0%
Farmer	23	21	19	12	7	6	8	3.7%	3.3%	3.0%	1.9%	1.1%	1.0%	1.3%
Manual Workers	98	74	73	63	56	53	38	15.8%	11.8%	11.6%	10.0%	8.9%	8.4%	6.2%
Miner	21	20	17	13	13	12	11	3.4%	3.2%	2.7%	2.1%	2.1%	1.9%	1.8%
Total	619	629	629	627	629	630	615	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Butler et al *The British General Election of 2005 and earlier editions*

The proportion with professional backgrounds has declined from around 45% in 1979 to below 40% in 2005. Within this category the proportion of former barristers has halved while the proportion of former solicitors and teachers from universities/colleges has risen. MPs with a background in business tend to be Conservative and the decline in the number from business was reversed in 2005. As the professions have declined they have been replaced by MPs from other non-manual occupations and 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, in 2005 14% were.

Table 6 Occupation of MPs elected at the 2005 General Election

	Number			Percentage		
	Lab	Con	LibDem	Lab	Con	LibDem
Professions	141	76	25	40%	38%	40%
Barrister	10	22	2	3%	11%	3%
Solicitor	18	18	2	5%	9%	3%
Doctor	1	3	2	0%	2%	3%
Civil service/local govt	22	3	3	6%	2%	5%
Teachers: University/college	41	0	3	12%	0%	5%
Teacher: school	32	6	9	9%	3%	15%
Business	25	75	18	7%	38%	29%
Miscellaneous	154	45	18	43%	23%	29%
White Collar	70	4	4	20%	2%	6%
Politician/Political organiser	60	20	7	17%	10%	11%
Publisher/Journalist	24	14	5	7%	7%	8%
Manual Workers	35	2	1	10%	1%	2%
Miner	10	1	0	3%	1%	0%
Total	355	198	62	100%	100%	100%

Source: Butler et al *The British General Election of 2005*

1.4 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

the War were elected in 1987, when four Labour MPs were from a non-white background. Following the 2005 election, 2.3% 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 7 Ethnicity of MPs elected at General Elections 1987 to 2005

	White					Non-White					Total				
	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Labour	225	266	409	400	342	4	5	9	12	13	229	271	418	412	355
Conservative	376	335	165	166	196	0	1	0	0	2	376	336	165	166	198
Liberal Democrat	22	20	46	52	62	0	0	0	0	0	22	20	46	52	62
Other	23	24	30	29	31	0	0	0	0	0	23	24	30	29	31
Total	646	645	650	647	631	4	6	9	12	15	650	651	659	659	646

Source: House of Commons Library Research Paper 08/12

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.

1.5 Education

Around one-third of current MPs have been to fee-paying schools. This proportion varies by party – In 2005, from 18% of Labour MPs to 60% of Conservative and 39% of Liberal Democrat. By comparison, 8% of pupils aged 11 and over in UK schools are in non-maintained (fee-paying) schools.¹ Around three-quarters of MPs elected in 2005 were graduates.

Table 8 Education of MPs elected in General Elections 1979 to 2005 (3 main parties)

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Labour Fee-paying school	18	14	14	15	16	17	18
Labour University	59	53	56	61	66	67	64
Labour Oxford & Cambridge	21	15	15	16	15	16	16
Conservative Fee-paying school	73	70	68	62	66	64	60
Conservative University	68	71	70	73	81	83	81
Conservative Oxford & Cambridge	49	48	44	45	51	48	43
Liberal Democrat Fee-paying school	55	52	45	50	41	35	39
Liberal Democrat University	45	65	73	75	70	69	79
Liberal Democrat Oxford & Cambridge	27	30	27	30	33	27	31

Source: Butler et al *The British General Election of 2005 & previous editions*

Since 1979, the main change in terms of educational background of MPs has been the rising proportion who have been to university (non-Oxbridge). In 1979, 225 MPs elected from the 3 main parties had been to Oxford or Cambridge universities, representing 36 of these parties' MPs. In the 2005 election, 163 of MPs elected from the 3 main parties had an Oxbridge background, 27% of MPs.

1.6 Parliamentary Experience

Of those elected in 2005, 119 (18%) had no previous parliamentary experience; 4 were elected in 2005 having previously served in parliaments prior to 2001, but not in the 2001-5 parliament; and 523 (81%) had been MPs in the previous 2001-05 parliament.

¹ 2003-4 figure; DFES *Education and Training Statistics for the UK 2004*

Table 9 Length of Parliamentary service of current MPs by party

MPs elected at 2005 General Election by date first elected and party

	CON	LAB	LD	Other	Total
By general election (includes by-elections before next general election)					
1959	1	0	0	0	1
1964	0	1	0	0	1
1966	0	2	0	0	2
1970	5	5	0	1	11
Feb 1974	8	2	1	0	11
Oct 1974	3	3	0	0	6
1979	3	8	1	2	14
1983	29	17	4	2	52
1987	18	42	1	3	64
1992	27	59	2	1	89
1997	29	137	20	2	188
2001	24	39	13	12	88
2005	51	40	20	8	119
Total	198	355	62	31	646
Summaries					
Pre-1979	17	13	1	1	32
1979 - pre-1997	77	126	8	8	219
1997 - pre-2001	29	137	20	2	188
2001 - pre-2005	24	39	13	12	88
2005	51	40	20	8	119
Total	198	355	62	31	646
<i>of which at by-elections</i>	9	41	6	0	56
Summaries (% of those elected in 2005)					
Pre-1979	9%	4%	2%	3%	5%
1979 - pre-1997	39%	35%	13%	26%	34%
1997 - pre-2001	15%	39%	32%	6%	29%
2001-pre-2005	12%	11%	21%	39%	14%
2005	26%	11%	32%	26%	18%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>of which at by-elections</i>	5%	12%	10%	0%	9%

Since 1979, the Member with longest service as an MP was Sir Edward Heath with 51.7 years. He is followed by Sir Peter Tapsell with 48.7 years service as an MP (to 31 March 2009) and Tony Benn with 47.8 years.

The shortest service was 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.