Shuffling the House of Cards? The Profile of Candidates and MPs in the 2015 British General Election

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Abstract
In the run up to the general election, Jeremy Paxman argued that the 2015 campaign was a choice ‘between one man who was at primary school with Boris Johnson and one man who was at secondary school with him – both of whom did PPE at Oxford’. Paxman’s quip reflects a long debate in British politics about the representativeness of the political class—do the people elected to represent us, bear any resemblance to the public they represent? The paper extends research by King (1981) and Rush (1994) who show that politicians are increasingly drawn from a narrow, middle class—a privileged class—despite significant efforts at increasing the descriptive representation of elected representatives. Drawing on data from the Parliamentary Candidates UK project, we document the profile of candidates standing for election on sex, race, age, school, education and occupational background. We show significant differences across the parties, both in terms of the selection of women and BME candidates and the extent to which these candidates were placed in winnable seats. Similar to previous elections, we see a narrowing of occupational backgrounds with fewer candidates from manual occupations, and an increasing proportion from ‘instrumental’ or politics facilitating careers (albeit fewer SPADs). Fewer MPs have been privately educated or attended Oxbridge, but the percentage of university educated MPs grows. However, despite a record number of women and BME MPs elected, Parliament remains disproportionately white and male.

Keywords: political class; representation; career politicians; gender; race; occupation
Introduction
In this paper, we are concerned with the composition of the political class: the socio-demographic background of those who are selected and elected, and the implications for democratic representation. At first glance, a description of who was selected to stand as parliamentary candidates in the 2015 British general election, and who was eventually elected to the House of Commons, might appear a prosaic exercise with little theoretical underpinning. However, the question of ‘who our representatives are’ remains a critical concern for contemporary democracy and is highly salient in public discourse. Indeed, as Riddell (1995) argues, one advantage of a more balanced and representative Parliament would be greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Britain’s elected politicians have been subject to much criticism in recent years (Allen and Cairney 2015; Oborne 2007). Among the public, the view is that the occupants of the Westminster Village are increasingly out of touch, insular, and unable to understand the lives and concerns of the British public (Audit of Political Engagement 9 2012; Riddell 1993). The political class has become self-perpetuating and elitist.1

The public’s view of the political class isn’t without evidence. Recent research has shown that politicians are increasingly drawn from a narrow, middle, privileged class (Durose et al. 2011; Criddle 2010), despite significant efforts at increasing the descriptive representation of elected representatives. A key consequence of the narrowing of the supply of candidates is the convergence among the political parties on an ideal or archetypal candidate. And when candidates do deviate from the typical white, mature, male MP, they look similar in most other regards (education, occupation, etc).

Here we examine both who gets selected and who gets elected; permitting us to consider whether individuals who differ from the archetypal MP are more likely to be selected in unwinnable seats. We also consider whether candidates who diverge from the norm in one aspect tend to be typical in other respects; whether they represent an ‘acceptable difference’ (Durose et al. 2012). We assess the extent to which the rise of candidates with previous occupations, frequently described as ‘politics facilitating’ or ‘instrumental’ (such as the MP’s researcher and the special advisor) continues, and whether candidates in winnable seats are more likely to have this experience than others.

The 2015 British General Election in Context
The 2015 British general election provides a distinctive opportunity to consider the descriptive representation of social groups. Although support for the two main parties has declined rapidly in the UK since the 1970s (Särlvik and Crewe 1983), the 2015 election represents a critical juncture when the smaller parties gained unprecedented attention in the election coverage. In fact, the proportion of the vote secured by the two largest parties remained largely unchanged2 but, with the Liberal Democrat collapse and the SNP and UKIP surges, the remaining—approximately 35%—of the

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1 The political class critique is often tied to debates about who is, and should be, represented (Carnes 2012; Kenny 2012; Lovenduski 2010).
2 In 2015 the combined vote for Labour party and the Conservative party was 67.2% of the total, in 2010 the same figure was 65.1%.
vote was more evenly distributed among the smaller parties. As a result, 56 SNP MPs were returned to Westminster, 50 more than in 2010. The SNP is now the third largest party in the House of Commons. UKIP only managed to maintain a single MP, Douglas Carswell, who defected from the Conservatives in 2014, but it secured 12.6% of the vote and came second in 120 constituencies. In terms of analyzing who was selected to stand it is therefore important to look beyond the usual suspects (Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) as the landscape of British politics has shifted markedly and may well shift further in subsequent elections.

Furthermore the 2015 election followed the first post WWII formal coalition and the overwhelming majority of the polls in the run up to the election were predicting a hung parliament resulting in another coalition or a minority government. In the end the polls were not a good predictor of the result in England. Even so it is likely that smaller parties will continue to play a significant role in British politics and we can no longer consider Britain a two or three-party system. The analysis in this paper allows us to assess whether the changed party make-up of the House of Commons has also resulted in a change in the social backgrounds of the individuals who sit on its benches.

In addition, the issue of political representation has become increasingly salient in public debate. Since the election of David Cameron as Conservative party leader in 2005 there has been increased inter-party competition on the issue of the diversity of candidates and MPs (Childs and Webb 2012). The parliamentary Labour party remains more representative of the British population in terms of sex and ethnicity, but the Conservative party has made serious efforts to challenge this perceived electoral advantage. Furthermore the Speaker’s Conference on parliamentary representation, which reported in 2010, has helped to foster an environment, where all of the parties represented in Westminster have been publicly called to account for the under-representation of specific social groups (House of Commons 2010). Arguably there is a consensus among the Westminster parties that increasing the diversity of the House is a ‘good’ thing (Campbell Forthcoming), although there is disagreement about the mechanisms that should be deployed to achieve the goal.

**Representation and professionalization: Britain’s political class over time**

Political representation is the process of making citizens' opinions, ideas and policy preferences present in the public policy-making process. Citizens are not literally ‘present’, but instead they are ‘re-presented’ through their elected Member of Parliament. In *The Concept of Representation*, Pitkin (1967) sets out four forms of political representation: formalistic representation (the formal structures of representation); symbolic representation (standing for the represented); descriptive representation (representing bodies) and substantive representation (representing ideas). The last two forms of political representation concern us most here. Contemporary academic discourse often problematizes the descriptive and substantive

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1 In 2010 the Liberal Democrats secured 23%, UKIP 3.1% and the SNP 1.7% of the votes cast in the General Election. In 2015 the Liberal Democrats secured just 7.9%, whilst UKIP’s share rose to 12.6% and 4.7% of the votes went to the SNP. http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7186/CBP-7186.pdf

2 This is something of an understatement and an inquiry was launched by the polling council to investigate what went wrong. [http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/](http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/)
representation of citizens through the lens of gender and ethnicity. However, there is also a resurgent interest in social class and regional/local identities that provides a further challenge to the current House of Commons’ claims to be ‘representatives’ of the people (Childs and Cowley 2011).

The social-demographic profile of MPs was first taken up by Mellors (1978) and subsequently by King (1983) and Rush (1994; 1999). They demonstrated that until the 1970s, Parliament was dominated by the amateur politician, for whom politics was a secondary and/or temporary excursion. Largely drawn from the aristocracy and landed classes and later from the trade unionists and working classes, politics was neither a long-term career choice nor did it provide sufficient means to make a living (Best and Cotta 2000). However, institutional reforms by MPs opened the way for the professionalization of politics and put in place opportunities to pursue politics as a career (Jun 2003). The (unintended) effect of reform and the professionalization of politics was to give rise to new class of politician—the career politician—or as King (1981: 250) notes, those ‘who live for and off politics’ (see also Riddell 1993; 1995).

This shift to the professional/career politician is linked to a number of important changes. In addition to the documented changes in the nature of professional and political background of MPs, issues of equality and diversity became prominent. The body of literature addressing the issue of fair political recruitment focuses on issues of under-representation as well as on the obstacles preventing women and ethnic minority candidates reaching political office (Ashe et al. 2010; Campbell and Childs 2010; Campbell & Lovenduski 2005; Childs et al. 2005; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Wängnerud 2000; Campbell et al. 2010; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Kulich et al. 2014).

In recent years, there is a gradual increase in the number of women and BME candidates (Sobolewska 2013; Campbell and Childs 2010). This has mainly been the result of parties employing a variety of strategies (e.g. AWS, A-Lists) in order to increase the number of the ‘under-represented’ groups in parliament. The Speaker’s Conference Report (2010) shows that both the government and political parties are willing to take steps towards the encouragement of candidate diversity and equality at the national and local levels (House of Commons 2010). There has been considerable variation within parties with respect to improving the diversity of their candidates. Historically, the Labour party has been most proactive in this regard and their candidates the most descriptively representative, but since 2005 there has been increasing interparty competition and the Conservatives have made efforts to secure significant improvements in the diversity of its benches.

Existing literature on the socio-economic background of candidates and MPs emphasizes the shift in the occupational background of ‘career’ politicians. In the past the most prominent career path for MPs was through ‘brokerage’ occupations such as law and education. These professional occupations provided candidates with skills and knowledge as well as local networks, which later facilitated their entry into politics.

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5 These reforms included increases in salaries and expenses, the number and type of pre-parliamentary jobs in politics (e.g. working for a pressure group, researcher, special advisor, consultant, etc.), leadership roles within the chamber and by creating a greater number of public offices for which parties could supply candidates (Jun 2003; Riddell 1995).
More recently, there has been a rise in ‘instrumental’ occupations as a path to political career. These are occupations with clear links to politics such as journalism and public relations, being a full-time elected representative at the local/regional level, trade union official, party official or parliamentary researcher (Cairney 2007: 214; Allen and Cairney 2015). Though there have been continuing changes in the nature of these ‘politics-facilitating’ occupations they still provide the main route to parliament for most politicians (Cairney 2007; Allen 2013). MPs are now drawn from a pool of candidates who are more likely to be middle class professionals and their main experience of work to be from within the political class (Best and Cotta 2000; Cairney 2007; Jun 2003; King 1981; Norris 1997; Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

Party variation in occupational background is evident and is mainly linked to the parties’ candidate selection processes. In the past, Conservative party MPs were drawn from business and law, and Labour had a large working class representation. The occupational background of Conservative MPs is ‘relatively stable, with a steady rise in business backgrounds that can be traced back to the nineteenth century’ (Cairney 2007: 229). In contrast, for the Labour party there was a shift in the occupational background ‘from the working classes at its inception, to the professions in the post-war period and now to the instrumental politics-facilitating in the twenty-first century’ (ibid.). Labour working class MPs were gradually replaced by professionals with teachers and lecturers comprising the largest occupational group of Labour parliamentarians since 1992 (Cairney 2007: 216). As a result of these differences in the parties’ occupational background, electoral swings and change in government provide the ‘lurch towards new politics-facilitating occupations’ as did the Labour party’s landslide in 1997 (ibid.).

In comparison to the body of literature on gender and racial/ethnic representation, there have been fewer studies that consider the educational background and previous occupation of parliamentary candidates and MPs, but there is a resurgent interest in the topic (Campbell and Cowley 2014b; Criddle 2010; McGuiness 2010). Studies have demonstrated the decline in the number of MPs from working class backgrounds during the second half of the twentieth century (Heath 2015; King 1981) and the need to recruit more politicians who have not had privileged backgrounds is now widely acknowledged. Elsewhere other research has shown that voters prefer candidates with lower personal incomes (Campbell and Cowley 2014) and there has been significant public debate in recent years about the role of wealth in electoral politics.6

In addition to considering the gender and racial/ethnic make up of the Commons we assess the extent to which the 2015 intake is made up of career politicians whose previous occupations were directly related to politics or were ‘politics facilitating’ (Cairney 2007; Cowley 2012). We subject a key element of the political class critique of contemporary British democracy to scrutiny and see whether it has any foundation within the 2015 intake to the House of Commons.7

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7 Allen and Cairney (2015) have warned of simply deploying the trope of the political class without subjecting it to rigorous empirical investigation and conceptual refinement. Their critique suggests that
Data and approach
We present a descriptive account of the profile of parliamentary candidates for the 2015 general election for candidates from the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National, Plaid Cymru, UKIP, Green and Northern Ireland parties. The data come from the Parliamentary Candidates UK (PCUK) project, which analyses Britain’s changing political class by collecting, among other variables, detailed data on the socio-demographic profile of both candidates and MPs from 1945.

Collecting data on candidates is a difficult exercise as there is no single source of candidate data, from the regulator (the Electoral Commission), or from the political parties themselves. The latter is more difficult given the varying resources and professionalization of internal party organizations. Once elected however, data for MPs is more readily available, due in large part of the efforts of the House of Commons Library, academic research (Rush 1994; Nuffield Election Guides), public affairs (DODs) and public interest organizations (TheyWorkforYou.com; YourNextMP.com). However, these data are limited in terms of the range of variables collected, or by their form (e.g. in hard copy as almanacs or fact books).

This means that efforts to understand who is selected and who is elected in Britain is often contingent on what gets put into the public domain by the candidates/MPs themselves. And candidates have incentives to make public those attributes that are deemed more attractive by the electorate. For example, research by Campbell and Cowley (2014b) shows voters prefer candidates who are local above any other trait. This creates an incentive for candidates to claim local connections, however tangential (e.g. grandmother born in constituency, rental accommodation during campaign to show a ‘local’ address, etc.). Candidates are equally incentivized to hold back information that is not electorally valuable (e.g. being a ‘Westminster insider’).

We rely on publicly available data from a range of sources, including local/national newspapers; party, candidate and election-related websites; social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter); and historical data/texts to build the dataset. Unsurprisingly, information about candidates is a function of party’s resources. Data for Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates, and former MPs, is relatively easy to find; however, there is limited data for smaller party candidates, especially where parties field ‘paper candidates’. 

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8 We collect information on independent candidates if they are one of the top two finishers in a constituency.

9 vanHeerde-Hudson and Campbell acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust in funding this project (RPG-2013-175).

10 There are differences among the parties in terms of resources available to monitor candidate data; the smaller parties have few if any resources in this regard.

11 We rely on information that is put into the public domain by candidates and parties and aggregate this information across the various sources.

12 As a result the percentage of missing data for the educational and occupational background of all PPCs is higher than for MPs. We have no missing data for MPs on occupation, but 28% missing for all candidates from all seven parties. The per cent missing for candidates for education is: school = 65%; university = 45%; oxfordbridge = 50%; the per cent missing for MPs is 11%, 2% and 2% respectively. We note that the increased rate of MPs schooltype is mainly due to the lack of information for the new cohort of SNP MPs.
In the sections below we compare the 2015 cohort of MPs to previous cohorts dating back to 1979 documenting the changes in the socio-demographic profile of MPs overtime. We then look at the profile of all candidates standing in 2015 across five key variables (gender, race/ethnicity, education, occupation and age) and show key differences across parties in terms of selection strategies and target seats.

Gender and race/ethnicity are binary measures. Although a more detailed measure of race/ethnicity is preferable, it remains for candidates to self-identify, and given that few do publicly, the binary measure remains the most valid. We measure three dimensions of candidates’ educational background: the type of school they attended (state or privately funded), whether they have a university education and whether they are graduates of Oxford or Cambridge universities. For the analysis of candidates’ occupational background, we consider their occupation immediately prior to election and code it as ‘brokerage’ (e.g. legal profession, civil service), ‘instrumental’ (e.g. journalists, SPADS) and ‘business’ (e.g. private sector employees or company owners) (Cairney 2007). We compare the candidates/MPs for whom politics is a life-long profession with those who entered politics from other pathways.

Britain’s changing political class?

Gender

For most of the 20th century, women comprised no more than 10% of all MPs. The 1997 general election, however, was a turning point for the representation of women. In an attempt to close the ‘gender gap’, by appealing to women voters (who, according to polling, were crucial to the election outcome) the Labour party introduced all-women shortlists (AWS) to ensure the selection of women in safe seats (Peake, 1997; 195-177). The strategic move to AWS along with the party’s landslide victory doubled the number of women MPs in parliament from 60 to 120 overnight (18% of all MPs). Labour was now far ahead of the other parties with 101 Labour women MPs compared to the Conservatives 13. By 2010 the gap between the parties had narrowed somewhat but Labour remained by far the most representative party in terms of women MPs. In 2010, after David Cameron employed his A-list policy, the number of Conservative women MPs increased to 28 (16%) (Campbell and Childs 2010a). This was nearly half the proportion of women in the parliamentary Labour party (31% of Labour MPs elected 2010 were women) but it led to a further increase in the percentage of women MPs in 2010 (22%). There was a backlash among the Conservative grassroots against the Conservatives A-list in 2010 and the policy, which never constituted a full gender quota, was considerably watered down.

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13 The historical data from the House of Commons observes only Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs.

14 For Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru and the SNP we use two measures to choose our winnable seats: whether there was <=10% difference in vote share between the 1st and 2nd parties (similar to BBC) and whether the party was second in the constituency at the 2010 general election. The marginality measure gives an indication of where a seat may change hands and the party second allows us to determine whether the party actually stands a chance at winning the seat. For UKIP and Greens, this criteria doesn't apply given their results in 2010. Here we used their stated target seats, so their judgment of whether they are competitive for a seat. Our measure doesn’t pick up 3-way marginals.
Nonetheless the Conservative party continued to gradually increase the proportion of women selected to stand in winnable seats. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of women in the House of Commons rose again in 2015 from 22 to 29%.

![Insert Table 1 here](image)

Figure 1 shows women MPs over time, the Conservative party increased the percentage of women on their benches from 16 per cent to 21 per cent, but the overall increase was largely driven by the Labour party and the SNP who increased the percentage of women among their MPs from 35 per cent to 43 per cent and 17 per cent to 36 per cent respectively. The Labour party delivered this increase through their continued use of party quotas in the form of all-women-shortlists. The SNP did not use quotas—although they have recently voted to allow their use—but their landslide victory resulted in the party increasing their representation in parliament from six to 56 MPs (leaving just three seats in Scotland not in SNP hands) creating an unprecedented situation where some candidates elected to parliament had not even been party members prior to the referendum campaign in 2014. As such the election provided a unique opportunity for women candidates in Scotland to overcome both the incumbency disadvantage and entrenched party practices that discriminate against them in the rest of the UK (Mackay and McAllister 2012).

![Insert Figure 1 here](image)

Table 2 below reinforces these findings. The Labour party was considerably ahead of the other parties in terms of placing women in target seats (54% of their candidates in target seats were women compared with 33% overall). The Labour party was followed by the SNP who placed women in 36 per cent of their target seats, although given they took all but three seats in Scotland the notion of target seats might be somewhat redundant in this case. The Liberal Democrats placed women in 35% of their target seats. However, none of these women candidates were returned as MPs. The Liberal Democrat’s representation in the House of Commons fell dramatically from 56 to just 8 with no women at all among the 2015 cohort. Historically the Liberal Democrats have tended to place men in safer seats than women (Campbell and Childs 2010b; Campbell and Lovenduski 2005) and this is probably the best explanation for why the residual Liberal Democrat MPs are all men. The Conservative party placed women in 28% of their target seats, which was an improvement on their historic record but still considerably behind the other main parties. UKIP was by far the least representative party with just 14% cent women candidates and 20% women in their target seats.

![Insert Table 2 here](image)

Race/ethnicity
The 2015 general election proved critical for ethnic minority representation. There are now 41 (6%) black and ethnic minority (BME) MPs in the House of Commons, the highest number of BME MPs in parliament to date. However, the increase is a function of the steps taken and strategies employed in the 2010 general election by parties and candidates alike. Sobolewska (2013) argues that the increase in the number of BME MPs can be attributed to the unusual opportunity structure of the 2010 electoral context. On the one hand, there was the ‘opportunity’, created by the
record number of retiring incumbents and thus a high number of new MPs. On the other hand, the three main parties were publicly committed to responding to the challenge of under-representation (House of Commons 2010). The Conservatives wanted to signal a modern party image, while Labour and the Lib Dems wanted to win back ethnic minority voters.

Figure 2 shows the trend in BME MPs by party over time. Parliament did not have a single BME MP until 1987, when four were elected, all from the Labour party. Nearly two decades later, the number of BME MPs had risen to 15 in 2005, 13 of which were Labour. It was not until Cameron’s election as Conservative party leader in December of 2005, when he began his modernization agenda, that the Tories started to take BME candidate recruitment and selection seriously. The results of their and Labour’s continued efforts were made clear in 2010, when 27 BME MPs were elected, and the Tories increased their BME MPs from two in 2005 to 11.

Despite the progress made in 2015, BME MPs make up 6% of Parliament, but 13% of the British population. To put the gains in perspective, it would take double the current number of MPs to achieve a proportionally representative Parliament. To do so requires increasing the number of BME candidates selected and, more importantly, the type of seat BME candidates contest. In 2015, less than eight per cent of candidates selected to stand in the 2015 general election were from black or minority/ethnic backgrounds. The Conservatives fielded the highest percentage of BME candidates (10%), followed by the LibDems (9%) and Labour (8%). The SNP, with just 2% BME candidates, had the lowest percentage among the parties we observe.

But selection alone isn’t enough. Increasing BME MP representation requires placing candidates in winnable seats. Research has shown that while the percentage of BME candidates selected has steadily grown, BME candidates are often selected in unwinnable seats. Kulich et al.’s (2014) evidence suggests that in the last three UK general elections, seats contested by minority candidates were harder to win than those seats contested by white candidates.

Mirroring our findings for women candidates, the parties differed not only in the percentage of BME candidates selected, but whether the candidates were placed in winnable seats. Figure 3 shows that although the Tories led with the highest percentage of BME candidates selected overall, it was Labour who did better in terms of placing BME candidate in their target seats (14% BME candidates in Labour targets, compared to just 5% for the Tories). Labour increased their number of BME MPs from 16 to 23 in 2015, despite their poor electoral showing, again illustrating the importance of where candidates are placed. The story for the Tories is more complex: they selected the highest percentage of BME candidates, but had the fewest in target seats. So how then did the Conservatives increase the number of Tory BMP MPs in 2015 to 17, up six from the 2010 general election? They did so by putting BME candidates in a different kind of winnable seat—safe, Tory retirement seats—where they selected BME candidates in 7 out of 38 retirement seats. In doing so, they

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15 Post-war BME MPs. The first ever BME MP was Dadabhai Naoroji elected 1892.
virtually guaranteed the election of James Cleverley (Braintree), Suella Fernandes (Fareham), Nusrat Ghani (Wealden), Ranil Jayawardena (Hampshire North East) and Rishi Sunak (Richmond), all whom enjoyed majorities of more than 30%. 16

[Insert Figure 3 here]

**Education**

The educational background of MPs is closely associated with changes in the political class and the professionalization of politics. Since 1979, we have observed three trends with respect to the educational background of MPs. First, the percentage of MPs attending fee-paying schools has declined, particularly for Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs. Second, the percentage of university educated MPs has increased significantly. And third, the percentage of MPs who attended Oxbridge has also steadily declined. Figure 4 shows that the profile of MPs elected in 2015 continue these trends.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

As shown in Figure 4, the decline in the percentage of MPs from fee-paying schools is notable. In 1979, 73% of Tory MPs attended fee-paying schools; by 2015, only 46% of MPs had. The LibDems have experienced a similar decline, now with just one of their eight MPs having attended a fee-paying school (Nick Clegg). The percentage of Labour MPs attending fee-paying schools has remained relatively constant, but decreasing from 18% in 1979 to 14% in 2015.

Across all three main parties, the percentage of MPs who are university educated has increased steadily; in 2015 83% of MPs were university educated. The increase is most stark for LibDem and Labour MPs. For the latter, 59% MPs attended university in 1979, climbing to 84% for the cohort elected in 2015. The drop in the percentage of MPs attending Oxbridge universities—from a high of 51% in 1997 to 26% in 2015—is largely due to changes in selection of Tory party MPs, driven by party modernizers looking to shed the image of the party for a rich, white, elite.

The narrowing of the political class is perhaps best observed by looking at the profile of 2015 candidates’ educational backgrounds in more detail. Overall, 83% of parliamentary candidates were educated to the degree level or higher, which compares to just 8% in the UK population. While there is some variation among the parties, those who stand for nomination, are selected and elected are more likely to have been university educated. For an electorate looking for MPs ‘more like me’, the numbers are few indeed. UKIP had the highest percentage of candidates who didn't attend university, 35%, followed by SNP candidates at 23%. But candidates don’t look far off candidates for the three main parties with 77% having university degrees, compared to 85% for the Tories, 85% for Labour and 88% for the Liberal Democrats.

Finally, looking at the placement of university-educated candidates, specifically those candidates who attended Oxbridge universities, we do not see evidence of the parties stacking their target seats with Oxbridge alums (see Figure 5). In fact, for Labour and

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16 Safe retirement seats measured where there is a >10% difference in vote share between the 2010 first and second place vote and the party’s incumbent has stood down.
the Conservatives the reverse was true: a substantially lower percentage of candidates with Oxbridge educations were selected in target seats than non-target seats. For the Tories, 18% of candidates with Oxbridge degrees were in target seats compared to 30% in non-targets. For Labour, the figures are 11% and 19% respectively. Whether Labour and Tory constituency parties intentionally selected non-Oxbridge educated candidates cannot be inferred from our data, however, its clear from the representation debate having an elite, university education—particularly Oxbridge—is not necessarily seen as an electoral asset.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

The reverse was true for the LibDems (24% v. 18%) and the Greens (60% v. 9%), albeit the latter with a very limited number of target seats. Another finding from Figure 5 is the absence of any SNP candidates with an Oxbridge education. Despite having the highest percentage of university-educated candidates, not a single SNP candidate in our dataset attended Oxbridge. In fact, SNP candidates are remarkably loyal to Scottish universities by and large.

**Occupation**

Our analysis of 2015 shows two key trends: first, the progressive abandonment of more traditional professional backgrounds, such as the legal profession, in favour of occupations with direct links to politics; second, increasingly more candidates and MPs come from non-traditional backgrounds (coded as ‘other’ in our scheme).

[Insert Figure 6 here]

From Figure 6 we get strong evidence of the continuation of the post-1997 trend: the number of MPs from traditional professional backgrounds (such as legal or manual) has shrunk significantly since 2010; while more and more candidates with politically relevant jobs (journalists or SPADs) are winning election. While this could be regarded as a symptom of the professionalization of the British political class, we also see a rise in numbers of MPs with a business background. This could be due to the parties actively trying to respond to the demands for representativeness or to the change in a Conservative majority in 2010, as we generally see a bigger rise in the proportion of business-background MPs from 2005 to 2010 than from 2010 to 2015.

As for differences between candidates and elected MPs in 2015, interesting trends emerge once the figures are cut by party. Losing candidates from ‘unconventional’ backgrounds are higher in number for the Conservatives, with winning candidates mainly coming from brokerage or instrumental occupations. In the case of Labour, the percentage of winning candidates from instrumental occupational backgrounds (47%) seems greater than the conservatives (29%). Conversely, more winning Conservatives have business (42%) backgrounds than Labour (9%). In both cases the figures for loser candidates are the opposite of winners: there’s a lower percentage of business-background losers for the conservatives than winners, whereas the percentage of business-background losers is greater than winners for Labour. This could mean that Labour tends to put candidates with instrumental backgrounds in more winnable seats, while the Conservatives favour business backgrounds instead. Figures for candidates in target seats confirm this, as 44% of Conservative-held Labour marginal seats were contested by instrumental-background candidates for Labour; while 45%
of Labour-held Conservative marginals saw a conservative candidate with a background in business.

[Insert Table 3]

As for the ‘outsider’ parties, the two trends outlined before seem to find confirmation: in the case of the Greens, more than half (54%) of the candidates had ‘unconventional’ backgrounds not captured by the instrumental/brokerage/business scheme that seems to fit the major parties well enough. As for the SNP, the background of their brand new cohort of MPs seems to mirror the career narrative, with 43% of the newly elected SNP MPs coming from instrumental backgrounds and all losing SNP candidates having an unconventional background.

If the SNP MPs don’t seem to deviate from the overall trend in selection, how do the newly elected MPs compare to the already sitting ones? If we compare the 151 new entrants to the 556 MPs who’ve won re-election, we see that the former have a greater percentage of instrumental occupational backgrounds. This suggests that the professionalization of politics narrative might still be relevant, with more new candidates choosing jobs with a political career in mind. Another noteworthy trend emerging from this comparison is that more newly elected MPs tend to come from unconventional (other) backgrounds. Together with the Green candidates, this provides more evidence for the overall shift in occupational backgrounds of MPs from the past.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Age
Finally, the professionalization of politics is confirmed by a shift to the age at which MPs begin their political and parliamentary career. There has been a shift from parliamentarians who established a prominent social and economic standing before entering the House, to politicians who choose politics as a career at an early stage in their life and consequently there has been an increase in the number of politicians who are first elected in their 30s and early 40s (Riddell 1995: 186-7; King 1981). King (1981) shows that since the late 1970s the British parliament has become a younger legislature with the number of MPs entering the Commons in their 30s comprising more than half of the total number of MPs. Simultaneously, the number of parliamentarians at the age of 50 or more has seen a steady decline.

[Insert Fig 7 here]

As shown in Figure 7, the 2015 cohort of MPs continues the trend: the British parliament is becoming a younger legislature with an increasing number of MPs entering the House of Commons in their 30s and early 40s. The average age of MPs who were elected for the first time on May 7th, is 44 years which is significantly lower than the average age of the whole of the 2015 cohort (51 years). The 2015 cohort also includes the highest percent of newly elected MPs in their 20s (7%), including a 20-year old politics student, Mhairi Black. Black defeated one of Labour’s most senior figures, Douglas Alexander, and is the youngest Member of Parliament in the modern era (Hawkins et al. 2015).

[Insert Table 5 here]
Some variation however, exists when we look at the 2015 intake by party. Overall, the SNP is the party with the youngest group of MPs, with 11% of SNP MPs in their 20s and 16% in their 30s. Labour is the party with the highest number of MPs aged over 70 (7%). The biggest pool of Conservative MPs are in their 40s (37%), followed by those in their 50s (34%). Compared to Labour’s ‘oldest’ and SNP’s ‘youngest’ patterns, the Conservative parliamentarians form a more balanced group with no significant extreme cases. Arguably party differences to the age of MPs relates to the electoral fortunes of the parties; for example, Labour elected a large number of new MPs in 1997 and thus the Labour parliamentary group is today older, while the SNP has elected for the first time such a large number of new MPs so they are younger. Consequently, the age of newly elected MPs can be used as a better indicator for party differences.

This age group pattern is reinforced when we look at the parties’ candidate selections by winning and losing candidates. Table 6 below underpins the findings about the age at which politicians decide to start their parliamentary career. It is evident that the majority of the winning candidates for both the Conservative and Labour parties come from the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups. The main difference between the two parties emerges when we look at their candidate selections from the younger groups. Though Labour selected more candidates in their 20s, the party managed to elect a lower number than the Conservative party.

[Insert Table 6 here]

On the ‘oldest’ end of the spectrum, the Labour party selected a larger number of candidates over 60 years, and as a result elected the highest number of ‘older’ MPs (4%) compared to the Conservative party (3%). Labour has the four oldest MPs in its rank, aged 80 years or over. The 85-year old Gerald Kaufman, is the ‘Father of the House’ and the oldest MP in the Commons. Three more Labour MPs, Dennis Skinner, David Winnick and Paul Flynn are also elected in their 80s. Therefore, it seems that the parties tend to select their winning candidates from the ‘middle-range’ age groups that consequently, constitute the largest number of MPs in the House of Commons. Slight differences do exist between parties especially with the youngest groups but the general pattern is overall consistent.

**Conclusions**

So how representative is the new Commons of the public it serves? The 2015 general election produced a more representative Parliament and two new records. There are now more women MPs than ever before and the same for MPs from black/minority ethnic backgrounds. Fewer MPs have attended fee-paying schools or went to Oxbridge, but the percentage of university-educated MPs has increased to 83%. Parliamentarians are slightly younger on average and there are fewer MPs from manual occupations and the traditional professions. More MPs are from ‘other’ occupations, including those that are politics facilitating, or those jobs that provide a direct link to Westminster politics (parliamentary researcher, lobbyist). The ‘villain’ of previous elections, the special advisors, are fewer in number.
Changes and new records aside, the socio-demographic profile of the new Parliament is not significantly different, and far from being descriptively representative of the UK public. And despite the increasing number of parties competing for seats, the data show that the newer parties did not offer much by way of diversity of candidates across the range of variables we consider here. In fact, far from fielding the anti-Westminster, anti-establishment outsiders, the profile of candidates from the smaller parties look remarkably similar to the more established parties. And despite all the rhetoric of a new kind of politics happening north of the border, those who are selected and elected remain drawn from a narrow, middle-class.
Tables and figures

Table 1. Women MPs by party (2015)

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Figure 1. Percentage of female MPs by party (1979-2015)
Table 2: Women candidates by party (2015)

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Figure 2: Percentage of BME MPs by party (1979-2015)
Figure 3: BME candidates by party and target seats

Figure 4: Education of MPs by party, 1979-2015
Figure 5. Percentage of Oxbridge educated candidates by party and target seats (2015)

Figure 6. MP occupation prior to election
### Table 3. Occupation of 2015 candidates by party and win/loss (2015)

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<tr>
<th>Party</th>
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<th>Con Winner</th>
<th>Green Loser</th>
<th>Green Winner</th>
<th>Lab Loser</th>
<th>Lab Winner</th>
<th>LD Loser</th>
<th>LD Winner</th>
<th>Other Loser</th>
<th>Other Winner</th>
<th>PC Loser</th>
<th>PC Winner</th>
<th>SNP Loser</th>
<th>SNP Winner</th>
<th>UKIP Loser</th>
<th>UKIP Winner</th>
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### Table 4. MP occupation: 2010 v. 2015 cohorts

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Figure 7. Average age of MPs at election (1979-2015)

Table 5. Age of newly elected MPs, 1979-2015

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(Numbers are percentages)
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References

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