

Parliamentary Privilege 2024

Educational backgrounds of the new House of Commons

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Overview

- 63% of MPs were educated in comprehensives, with 23% educated privately, and 12% in selective schools. 15% of Labour MPs and 46% of Conservative MPs attended private schools.
- The proportion of privately educated MPs is at a record low for the three main parties in over almost 50 years of data, which peaked in 1983 at 51% of MPs.
- Of 350 newly elected MPs, 66% were educated at comprehensives, 22% at independent schools and 11% at grammars.
- 20% of MPs attended Oxbridge at undergraduate level, while 34% went to another Russell group institution.
- 10% of MPs did not attend university for undergraduate, while 40% of MPs have a postgraduate qualification.
- 19% of Labour went to Oxbridge, compared to 29% of Conservatives. 42 MPs went to both a private school and Oxbridge.
- The educational background of the 2024 Commons is more socio-economically diverse than any parliament recorded since 1979.
- The new Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, continues a trend since recording began in 1937 of every Prime Minister (except the last Labour PM, Gordon Brown) who attended university having attended Oxford.

Introduction

The 2024 General Election has come after a challenging period for the country. From fights over Brexit, to the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic and, most recently, the cost-of-living crisis. The last few years have been an often testing and tumultuous time for Parliament.

After that period, yesterday's election has brought with it considerable change to Westminster. 14 years of Conservative government have come to an end, with Labour winning a landslide, with a 172 seat majority, bringing them into government. This election has also seen an increase in representation for some of the country's smaller parties, with the Liberal Democrats going up from just 11 seats to 72, the Greens going from 1 seat to 4, and Reform gaining 5 MPs in Parliament for the first time.

In the lead up to this election, trust in politicians, and in Britain's system of government, was at an all-time low.¹ Around a third of the population feeling unrepresented by any major party in the UK.² And while this election has brought a huge amount of political change to Westminster, when asked before the election, many Britons remained sceptical this change would make a difference to their daily lives.³

This briefing considers the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of the 2024 Parliament. How different are the fresh faces about to take their seats in the House of Commons from those that have come before them? How similar are the backgrounds and experiences of our new MPs to the population as a whole? And have large scale political changes done anything to broaden the backgrounds of the people who represent us?

“Have large scale political changes done anything to broaden the backgrounds of the people who represent us?”

¹ National Centre for Social Research. (2024, June 12). *Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low*. <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

² Stowers, S. (2024, April 10). *Apathy in the UK: how does political discontent compare with other European countries*. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/apathy-in-the-uk-how-does-political-discontent-compare-with-other-european-countries/>

³ Smith, F. (2023, July 17). *Would things get better under Keir Starmer and Labour?* <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/45909-would-things-get-better-under-keir-starmer-and-lab>

Why does this matter?

Politicians make decisions that impact all of us. Who they are, as well as their backgrounds and experiences, impact on the decisions they make and the issues they choose to prioritise. If MPs come from very similar socio-economic backgrounds, and if their backgrounds look very different to those of the population as a whole, there is a risk that the concerns and priorities of all parts of society will not be adequately reflected in Parliament.

The Sutton Trust has been researching the educational backgrounds of MPs for almost 20 years. In that time there has been change, but it has been gradual. After the last election in 2019, just under a third (29%) of MPs were educated privately, compared to 7% of the general population. And while 21% of MPs attended Oxbridge, this compares to just 1% of the population overall.⁴

School attendance is not a perfect measure of socio-economic background. But it is information on an MPs' background that is relatively widely available, and which can give us a crucial insight into the social and economic circumstances they grew up in. Private school attendance, in particular, is strongly related to family income, with attendance rates close to 0% of children at most income levels, and rates only rising above 10% for those in families on the top 5% of incomes. For those who do attend from lower income families, housing wealth often enables their attendance,⁵ with just 1% of independent school pupils having their whole fees paid for by bursaries or scholarships, and just 5% having more than half of their fees covered by financial support.⁶

Importantly, politicians also make decisions on state education policy, and it is concerning if a large number of MPs do not have experience of the state education system for which they are responsible. Similarly, looking to university attendance, Britain's top ranked universities are still highly socially selective, with Oxford and Cambridge combined educating less than 1% of the UK population. Indeed, 81% of the UK population did not attend university at all, and individuals in this group have a wide range of skills, insight and experiences which should be utilised in Westminster.

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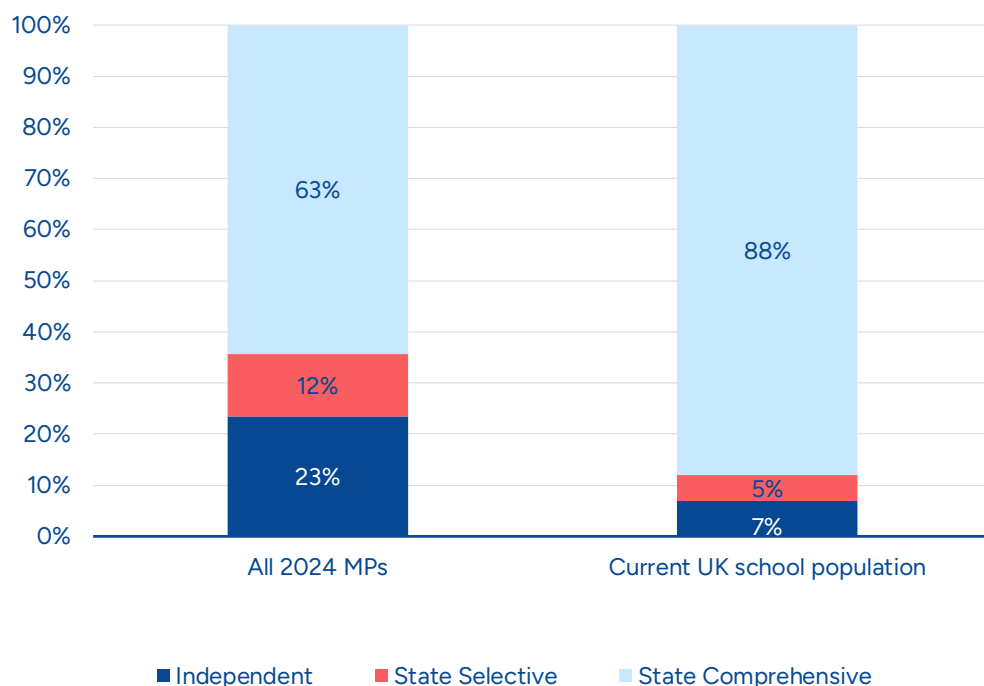
⁴ The Sutton Trust. (2019, December 13). *Parliamentary Privilege 2019*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/parliamentary-privilege-2019/>

⁵ Anders, J. & Henseke, G. (2021, February 8). *Housing wealth, not bursaries, explains much of private school participation for those without high income*. <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2021/02/08/housing-wealth-not-bursaries-explains-much-of-private-school-participation-for-those-without-high-income/>

⁶ Independent Schools Council. (2024). *ISC Census and Annual Report 2024*. https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf

Secondary schools attended by MPs

Figure 1: Secondary school type attended by MPs in 2024, compared to UK average



As shown in Figure 1, 23%⁷ of MPs in the 2024 Parliament attended a private school, with 12% having attended a selective state school, and 63% a comprehensive state school. These figures differ considerably to the school attendance of the UK population as a whole, but private school attendance of MPs has decreased since the 2019 Parliament (when it was 29%).

Of the 127 MPs who attended an independent secondary school, 4 were educated at the prestigious Eton College independent school, compared to 11 MPs in 2019 and 3 went to Winchester College (compared to 4 in 2019), with another 3 having attended Radley College.

⁷ Our school attendance figure is based on where an MP spent the majority of their time in secondary school (age 11-16). When conducting searches and contacting candidates for the secondary school they attended, also came across primary to sixth form or college attendance for many candidates which was also noted. When considering private attendance in this full age range (4-18), including those who attended at any point during primary, secondary or sixth form/college education, the rate of MPs privately educated rises to 26% – however it should be noted this is likely an underestimate, as full searches were not carried out for this time period for all candidates.

Table 1: Secondary school type attended by MPs in 2024, by political party

	Independent	Comprehensive	Selective
All MPs	23%	63%	12%
Labour	15%	73%	10%
Conservatives	46%	40%	12%
Liberal Democrats	31%	57%	10%
Other parties	15%	48%	38%

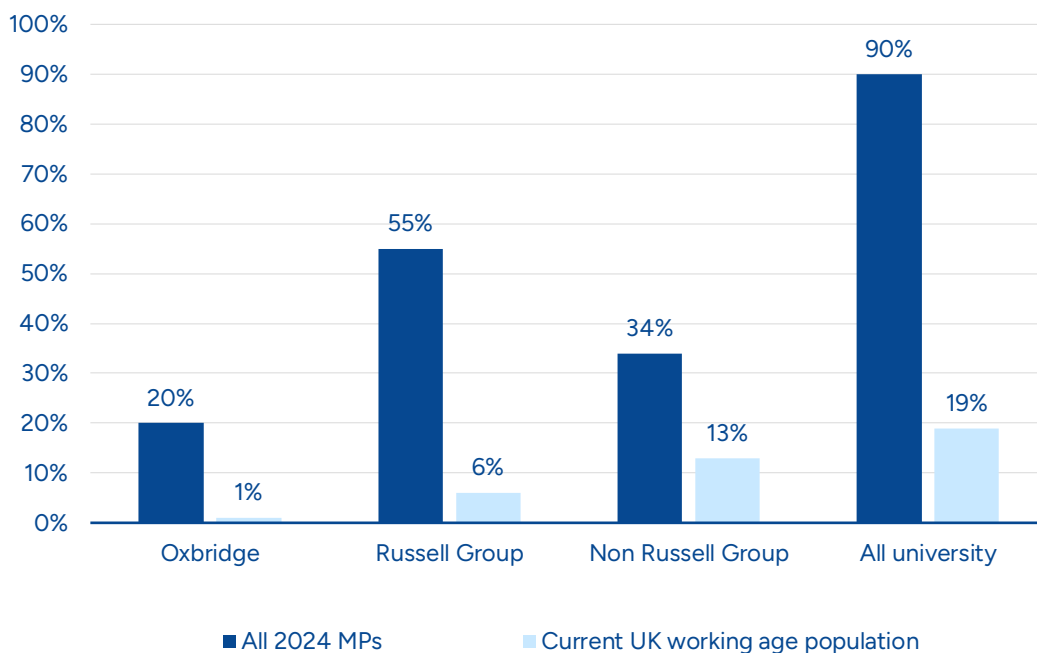
Table 2: % of MPs educated at private school by political party over time

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019	2024
Labour	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%	15%	16%	15%	14%	15%
Conservatives	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%	54%	50%	45%	41%	46%
Liberal Democrats	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%	40%	33%	2%	28%	31%
Three main parties	49%	51%	47%	41%	30%	31%	34%	37%	33%	32%	28%	24%

Sources: [1979-2015, Kavanagh, Cowley et al, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions. 2010 onwards, Sutton Trust]

Universities attended by MPs

Figure 2: University attendance for 2024 MPs, compared to UK average



1 in 5

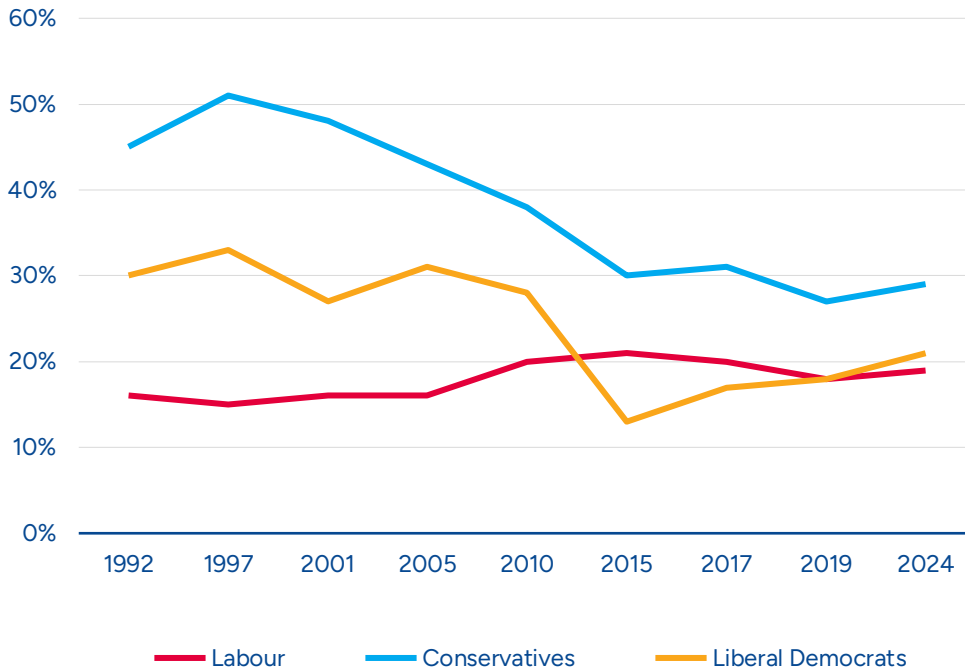
of the MPs elected in 2024 went to either Oxford or Cambridge for undergraduate.

90% of MPs in the 2024 Parliament attended university to study an undergraduate qualification, with 55% going to a Russell Group university, and 20% having attended Oxbridge. Again, these figures differ substantially from the population as a whole, with 19% attending university. In 2019, 21% of MPs went to Oxbridge whilst 54% went to a Russell Group institution.

Table 3: University attendance for 2024 MPs, by political party

	Oxbridge	Russell Group (Excl. Oxbridge)	Pre-1992	Post-1992	Other
All MPs	20%	34%	20%	12%	3%
Labour	19%	35%	19%	14%	3%
Conservatives	29%	39%	14%	8%	3%
Liberal Democrats	21%	34%	22%	9%	0%
Other parties	5%	23%	41%	2%	5%

Figure 3: Oxbridge attendance for MPs over time, by political party



Sources: [1979-2015, Kavanagh, Cowley et al, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions. 2010 onwards, Sutton Trust]

77 MPs attended the university of Oxford for their undergraduate degree, while 47 went to the University of Cambridge. Out of the 210 who attended a Russell Group institution, 17 went to the University of Edinburgh, 15 to the University of Manchester and 14 to the University of Glasgow.

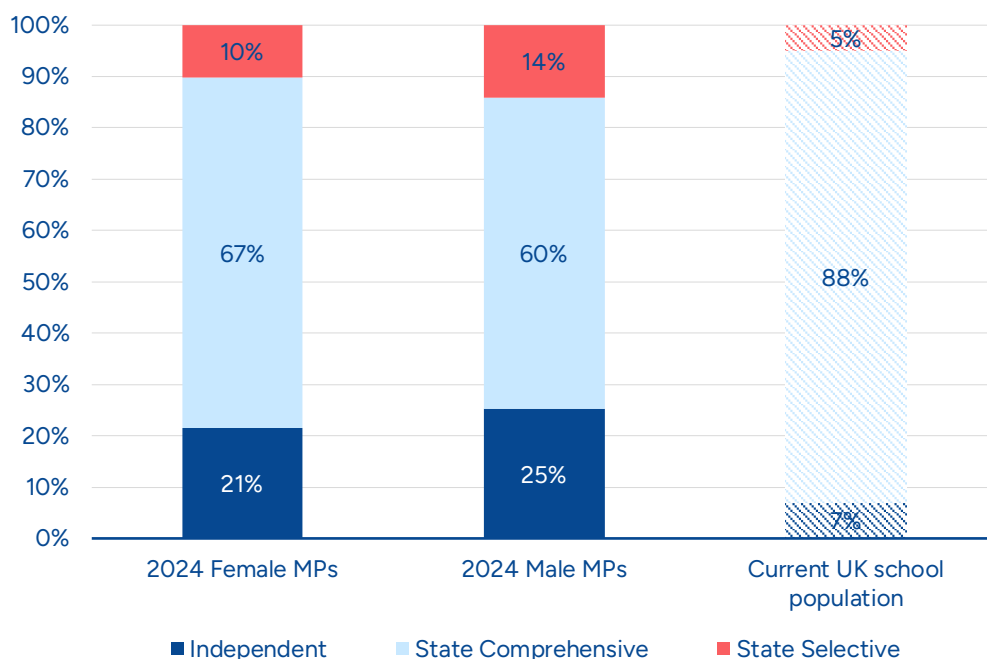
Overall, 42 MPs went through a pipeline of elite institutions, attending both an independent school and Oxbridge for their undergraduate studies. The new Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, was first in his family to attend university, going to the University of Leeds for his undergraduate, and then the University of Oxford, where he gained a postgraduate Bachelor of Civil Law degree. This continues a trend of every Prime Minister who attended university (except for one, Gordon Brown) since 1937 having attended the University of Oxford.⁸

“Sir Keir continues a trend of every Prime Minister who attended university (except for one, Gordon Brown) since 1937 having attended the University of Oxford.”

⁸ Elliot Major, L. (2024). *A Class Apart: Prime Ministers’ origins profoundly impact their political worldviews*. LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2024/04/16/prime-ministers-origins-impact-their-political-worldviews/>

Gender breakdown

Figure 4: Secondary school type attended by MPs in 2024 by gender, compared to UK average



40%

of MPs elected to House of Commons in 2024 are female, up from 34% on 2019.

Table 4: University attendance for 2024 MPs, by gender

	Oxbridge	Russell Group (Excl. Oxbridge)	Pre-1992	Post-1992	Other
2024 Female MPs	21%	34%	18%	13%	2%
2024 Male MPs	20%	35%	21%	10%	3%

New MPs in 2024

350 MPs are new to parliament since 2019, a significant amount of churn. When comparing the backgrounds of these MPs to those already sitting, the proportions educated at a private school and who attended university are more representative of the UK population, but are still not the same (as shown in Figure 5 for school and Table 5 for university).

Figure 5: Secondary school type attended by new MPs in 2024, compared to returning MPs and UK average

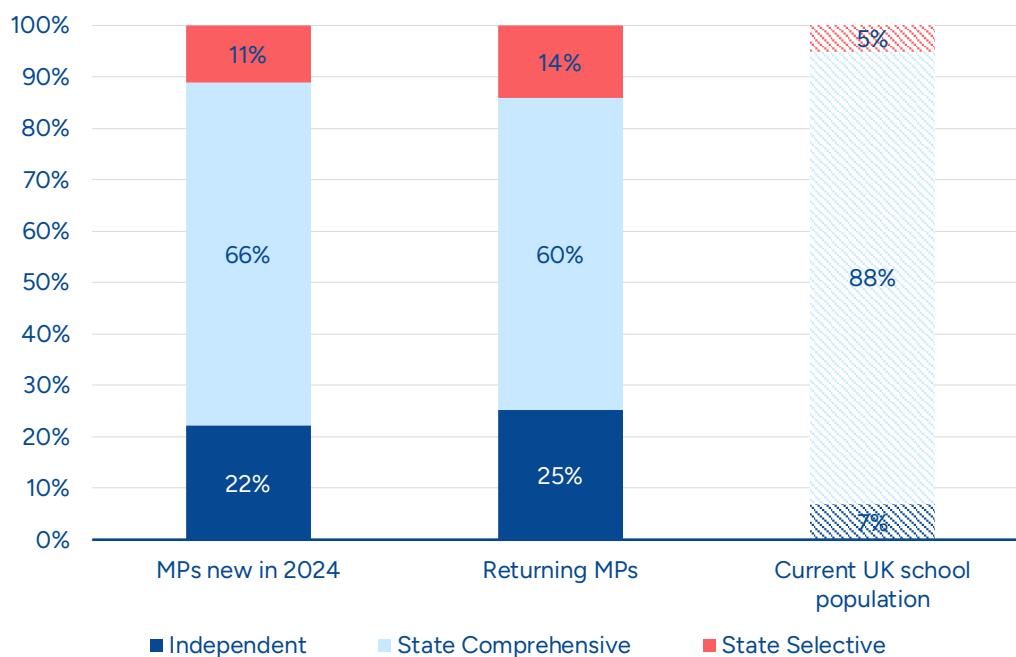


Table 5: University attendance for new MPs in 2024, compared to returning MPs

	Oxbridge	Russell Group (Excl. Oxbridge)	Pre-1992	Post-1992	Other
MPs new in 2024	18%	37%	18%	13%	3%
Returning MPs	23%	32%	21%	10%	2%

Breakdowns by UK nation

Table 6: Secondary school type attended by MPs in 2024, by UK nation

	Independent	Comprehensive	Selective
England	25%	62%	11%
Scotland	18%	80%	2%
Wales	17%	72%	10%
Northern Ireland	0%	25%	75%

Table 7: University attendance for 2024 MPs, by UK nation

	Oxbridge	Russell Group (Excl. Oxbridge)	Pre-1992	Post-1992	Other
England	22%	34%	19%	13%	2%
Scotland	6%	39%	33%	6%	4%
Wales	27%	37%	17%	10%	0%
Northern Ireland	0%	29%	29%	0%	12%

Making Parliament more representative

The 2024 General Election has brought a large amount of change to the House of Commons. But when it comes to improving socio-economic diversity, change has been slower. Despite clear progress, MPs are still much more likely to have been privately educated than the general public, and at the current rate of change, it will take another 20 years before the proportion of MPs who were privately educated matches that of the general population.

MPs are also still much more likely to have attended an elite university. For some of today's newly elected MPs, attending a highly selective institution will likely have been a major enabler in their own social mobility story, and it is perhaps not surprising that many MPs are highly educated. However, these institutions remain highly socially selective, and there is a great deal of skill, expertise and experience among those who have attended less highly ranked institutions (which previous Sutton Trust research have found are themselves major drivers of social mobility)⁹ and indeed those who have not attended university at all. But the skills, experiences and perspectives of these groups are not currently being fully utilised in Parliament.

It is clear there are significant barriers for individuals from working class backgrounds looking to enter into and succeed in politics. As with many careers, these barriers start in early childhood, and run right through an individual's time in the education system and on into the workplace.

In state schools, the existing citizenship curriculum is relatively limited in scope, and existing requirements are not always being fulfilled by state schools who are often managing a number of conflicting priorities. In 2023, polling of teachers commissioned by IPPR found that only 42% said their school provided regular citizenship lessons, just 16% reported visits from politicians, and only 23% said their school offered trips to political institutions such as Parliament.¹⁰

“At the current rate of change, it will take another 20 years before the proportion of MPs who were privately educated matches that of the general population.”

⁹ The Sutton Trust, Britton, J., Drayton, E., & Van Der Verve, L. (2021, November 24) *Universities and Social Mobility*. The Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/universities-and-social-mobility/>

¹⁰ IPPR. (2023, September 22). *Teach democracy classes in all schools and give votes at 16 to boost young people's faith in politics, report urges*. <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/teach-democracy-classes-in-all-schools-and-give-votes-at-16-to-boost-young-people-s-faith-in-politics-report-urges>

In contrast, top private schools often enjoy visits from current and former politicians.¹¹

And at both school and university, politically related extracurricular activities are often much more accessible to those from better off backgrounds. Previous Sutton Trust research has found state schools with the most disadvantaged intakes are half as likely to offer debating clubs than those with better off pupils,¹² whereas top private schools have their own debate chambers,¹³ and employ their own debate coaches to train.¹⁴ Within universities, participation in debating societies is also highly socially divided.¹⁵

Many would-be politicians start their political careers working for MPs, political parties, think tanks or charities. While unpaid internships in these fields are becoming less accepted, they do still exist, and jobs may not always be openly advertised, but instead filled informally through personal networks. Political parties also often put a huge emphasis on the importance of regularly campaigning before these opportunities are available, with associated travel costs.

The final hurdle for any aspiring politician before facing the electorate itself, is being chosen to stand by their preferred political party. There are reports of candidates paying for expensive coaching to help them through the selection

“The Parliamentary Candidate Selection process can be difficult to access for those without familial or independent wealth.”

¹¹ See e.g. Kidd, P. (2024, February 28). *Hancock makes an Eton mess*. The Times Diary. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/hancock-trips-up-at-eton-l2lzzx2rh>, Cirstea, A. (2024, March 18). *Public Service, entrepreneurship, and the life of an MP with the Chancellor of the Exchequer*. <https://www.winchestercollege.org/stories/public-service-entrepreneurship-and-the-life-of-an-mp-with-the-chancellor-of-the-exchequer> and St. Paul’s School. (2022, May 25). *The Future of: Education with Sally-Anne Huang, High Master, and the Rt. Hon Lord Baker of Dorking OP, 1948-53*. <https://www.stpaulsschool.org.uk/events/the-future-of-education/>.

¹² Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R. (2017, October 11). *Life Lessons*. The Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/life-lessons-workplace-skills/>

¹³ John Simpson Architects. (2024). *Jafar Gallery and Debating Chamber Eton College*. <https://www.johnsimpsonarchitects.com/pa/Eton-College-io.html>

¹⁴ Dulwich College. (2024). *Debating*. <https://www.dulwich.org.uk/senior-school/co-curricular/debating> and Tes (2023). *Debating Coach*. <https://www.tes.com/jobs/vacancy/debating-coach-hammersmith-and-fulham-1802822>

¹⁵ Montacute, R., Holt-White, E. & Gent, A. (2021, February). *The University of Life: employability and essential life skills at university*. The Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-University-of-Life-Final.pdf>

process,¹⁶ alongside the extremely high costs of standing as a candidate,¹⁷ making the process difficult to access for those without familial or independent wealth.

The issue of candidate socio-economic diversity has received very little attention from political parties. While parties do have diversity programmes or initiatives for women¹⁸ or ethnic minority candidates,¹⁹ far less support is available for working class candidates. The Labour party does run a bursary scheme for candidates from working class or low-income backgrounds,²⁰ but to our knowledge no party currently has a mentoring scheme or programme aimed at this group.

Looking more broadly, access to politics is unlikely to shift without wider changes to the education system to improve social mobility and educational opportunity. The Sutton Trust's recent report, *Fair Opportunity for All*,²¹ proposes a set of evidenced backed and costed recommendations, from the early years through to the workplace, to equip the government to move the dial on social mobility.

MPs, policymakers and political parties more widely all have a part to play in tackling this issue. It is vital for a healthy society that our representatives are drawn from across society, and that background is not a barrier to becoming an elected representative in Britain. Despite some progress, socio-economic background still plays far too large a role in access to politics. To improve trust, and to ensure the concerns and interests of all parts of Britain's population are represented in Westminster, it's time for change.

¹⁶ Atkins, L. (2024, July 3). *The Tory candidate system is broken: I should know*. The Spectator. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-tory-candidate-selection-system-is-broken/> and Le Conte, M. (2023, April 9). *How Rishi Sunak, Braverman and Gove used unknown £3,000-a session presentation guru to try to win over voters*. iNews. <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/meet-grahamLe-davies-influential-british-politics-2261513>.

¹⁷ Hardman, I. (2022, April 24). *So few can afford to stand for parliament, it's no wonder we get the wrong MPs*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/24/westminster-star-politicians-parliament-political>

¹⁸ For example, The Labour Party. (2023, October 6). *The Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme*. <https://labour.org.uk/updates/members-updates/the-jo-cox-women-in-leadership-programme/> Women2Win (2024). *Women2Win*. <https://www.women2win.com/> and Liberal Democrats. (2024). *Diversity: become a candidate*. <https://www.libdems.org.uk/members-area/candidate-diversity>

¹⁹ Butler, D. (2023, June 13). *Bernie Grant Leadership Programme*. https://www.dawnbutler.org.uk/bernie_grant_leadership_programme_2023_24

²⁰ The Labour Party. (2024). *How to be selected as a parliamentary candidate*. <https://labour.org.uk/resources/how-to-be-selected-as-a-parliamentary-candidate/>

²¹ The Sutton Trust. (2024). *Fair Opportunity for All*. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/fair-opportunity-for-all/>

Recommendations

Candidate selections

- Parties should review whether their selection processes for parliamentary candidates are open to individuals from all socio-economic backgrounds, and look at changing processes, or potentially offering financial support to applicants and candidates.
- All political parties should look at running support schemes and mentoring programmes aimed at increasing the representation of individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, similar to existing schemes aimed at improving gender or ethnic diversity.
- Political parties should monitor and anonymously report on the socio-economic background of both their candidates and those that apply to become candidates for their party.

Opening up involvement in politics

- The socio-economic backgrounds of staff working for MPs and political parties should be monitored and anonymously reported.
- Interns working in entry level roles in politics, for example for MPs or political parties, should be paid at least the Minimum Wage (£7.70 for 21 to 24 year olds) and preferably the Living Wage (£10.75 in London, £9.30 in the rest of the UK) if longer than one month. All internships should also be advertised publicly, and recruitment practices should be fair, transparent and based on merit.

- The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) should review their policies on the hiring of internships by MPs and Peers, including considering whether funding levels for Westminster offices need to be increased to ensure that interns are paid, or whether additional ring-fenced funds should be given to MPs to pay interns in their offices.
- Roles to work for MPs or in politics more widely should be openly advertised, rather than being filled informally via existing networks. Hiring decisions should be made in a fair and transparent manner, on the basis of merit.

In the education system

- The provision of citizenship/democracy education should be improved in state schools, to create a better understanding of politics, democracy and government.
- Opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities which help to develop skills which are valued in politics, including debating and public speaking, and skills such as self-confidence should be expanded in state schools, and access to these activities should also be widened within universities.



Methodology

We sought to get data on all 650 MPs elected to the House of Commons. We were able to get data on the school background of 542 MPs (83%).

For attending university for undergraduate study, we were able to get data for 612 MPs (94%).

Information on MPs' educational backgrounds were found primarily from public sources, such as candidates' campaign pages, LinkedIn profiles, Who's Who and local newspaper reports. Where information was not publicly available, we contacted candidates and their offices directly, asking them to provide data anonymously to be used in our figures. Many candidates were happy to provide us with this information, but some did not reply or declined to provide the information.

Gender is based on how an individual presents and the pronouns they are referred to with, particularly on their own website/materials.

Those who attended an international school [1% of MPs] have not been reported for school analysis. International universities have been counted in overall university attendance, but are not reported for breakdowns by university type.

Returning MPs are determined as those who were elected in the 2019 general election or any by-elections up to July 2024.

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