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Solving the problem of social background in the UK ‘political class’: do parties do things differently in Westminster, devolved, and European elections? (forthcoming in *British Politics*)

Abstract

It is now commonplace to criticise the failings of Westminster’s ‘political class’. One part of this criticism regards the limited extent to which Westminster politicians reflect the social background of the voting population. Each party has addressed the problem in different ways, with Labour more likely to focus on the representation of women and the Conservatives on people with ‘proper jobs’ before election.ⁱ Devolved and European elections have provided new opportunities for parties: Labour’s push for more elected women has been relatively effective in the Scottish, Welsh and European elections; and, before UKIP made significant gains in European Parliament elections in 2014, it promised candidates who were ‘not career politicians’. Yet, overall, new levels of elected representation have not produced a distinctive ‘political class’. There is still a common pattern of professionalization across devolved, Westminster and European parliaments, in which elected politicians have often similar kinds of education and employment background, and generally struggle to mirror the social background of their populations.

Introduction

It is now commonplace for broadcast, print and social media commentators to argue that elected politicians in the UK do not represent their constituents well. Instead, they are part of a self-referential ‘political class’ which is increasingly distant from the real world and mistrusted by the public (Cairney, 2014). The ‘political class’ is rarely defined with precision (Allen and Cairney, 2015). Yet, one clear part of this criticism regards the small extent to which Westminster politicians reflect the social background of the voting population. Instead, Westminster has far higher proportions of white, privately and Oxbridge educated, men. Many of these politicians have only had jobs relating to politics, while the vast majority do not have a working class background.

In this article, we identify the extent to which Westminster’s social background problem is shared in the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and the UK contingent of the European Parliament.ⁱⁱ There is some reason to expect divergence: non-Westminster elections are often linked to the hope that new venues, with different electoral rules and more political parties, provide new opportunities to challenge well-established patterns. On the other hand, we may expect a degree of continuity in some aspects of social background, to reflect the broad rise of a ‘political class’ that can be found in many legislatures (Borchert, 2003: 18-9) and, although traced at least as far back as the days of Mosca (1939: 50) and Weber’s ‘Politics as a Vocation’, taking on a new ‘professionalised’ dimension (Best and Cotta, 2000; Borchert and Zeiss, 2003; Gunlicks, 1978; British General Election Series 1951-2010; Rush and Cromwell, 2000). In a large number of countries, politics has become, to a large extent, a ‘profession, with a defined career path and few possibilities for interrupting it or for entering late’ (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 43).

We expect some differences in the newer legislatures, but also a mixed picture, to reflect four main factors. First, criticisms of the ‘political class’ are multifaceted and cannot be solved simultaneously. Instead, different political parties prioritise different solutions, and *social background depends heavily on the balance of power between parties*, which shifts markedly over time and across legislatures. Only one major party, Labour, engaged fully in recruitment reform, primarily to increase the number of successful female candidates (Cairney, 2011: 29-31; McAllister, 2000: 596). Its focus on recruiting more women *could* come at the expense of social representativeness by other measures – at least if linked to the desire of party leaders to place party worthies in Parliament, producing a rise in female candidates drawn almost exclusively from occupations related directly to politics and reducing further the number of representatives drawn from the working classes (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 51). Conservative (and now UKIP) success could have the opposite effect – electing more members who have allegedly ‘proved themselves’ in ‘proper jobs’ but reducing the overall proportion of women in the process.

Second, few parties have a significant presence in all legislatures. In multi-level political systems, local, regional, national and supranational political arenas can host their own, separate, political classes, or one single class can operate at multiple levels (Borchert, 2003: 1; Weisli, 2003; Stolz, 2003; 2009; Rush, 2001b).

Third, legislatures at each level underwent different processes of institutionalisation, and select their representatives using different electoral systems - features that can be used to produce variations in the type of politician elected, particularly when the institution is new and there are no incumbents. The Westminster Parliament is a historic institution elected through single member districts, with strong autonomy in candidate selection for local branches, favouring established incumbents with close ties to their constituents and local activists (Rush, 2001a: 93; Rush and Cromwell, 2000). The European Parliament has been directly elected since 1979, initially through vast single member districts and, since 1999, through a proportional closed list system where candidate selection remains the preserve of the party leadership. The devolved institutions of Scotland and Wales first held parliamentary elections in 1999. Both institutions use mixed electoral systems based on single member districts similar to those of Westminster, compensated by a proportional list that accounts for 33% (Wales) or 43% (Scotland) of seats.

Fourth, much debate in the lead-up to Scottish and Welsh devolution focused on the broad idea of ‘new politics’, rejecting the institutions and cultures of ‘old Westminster’ to broaden recruitment and create a more open political class, more representative of the country as a whole. Yet, a specific commitment to the representation of women was accompanied by a vaguer commitment to social and ethnic representativeness (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 43).ⁱⁱⁱ ‘New politics’ was never properly defined and always remained a vague aspiration rather than a set of clearly defined policies (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 11). Few binding measures were adopted to ensure that elected representatives were ‘new’. Rather, this was an aspiration to be taken forward by the political parties responsible for candidate recruitment and selection (McAllister, 2000: 597), partly because ‘the legal status of positive action systems was unclear’ in the run up to devolution (Russell, 2002b: 55).

Our article draws on comparative data over time for the 650 members of the Westminster parliament (MPs), 129 members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), 60 members of the Welsh

Assembly (AMs), and 73 UK members of the European Parliament (MEPs).^{iv} We analyse change in three main dimensions: the number of men and women in parliaments and parties; their class backgrounds, measured according to their ‘formative’ occupations; and, their educational background, focusing on the private/ public distinction and recruitment from elite and other higher education institutions.^v

We find that new levels of elected representation have helped produce important changes but not a distinctive ‘political class’. Most notably, the remarkably high levels of male representation at Westminster have been exposed by marked reductions in the other legislatures. There are also reduced levels of private and Oxbridge education in the devolved territories. However, there is still a common pattern of professionalization across devolved, Westminster and European parliaments, in which elected politicians have often similar kinds of education and employment background, and generally struggle to mirror the social background of their populations.

Can parties solve the ‘political class’ problem? Do new venues help?

The ‘political class’ argument is difficult to pinpoint and operationalise, and it could relate to anything from elected politicians’ flawed characters, limited roots in local constituencies, and inexperience of the real world, to their ‘inability to represent devolved and English regions; and, their tendency to engage in a style of politics that is off-putting to the general public’ (Allen and Cairney, 2015). We can identify a variety of, potentially contradictory, ways in which these problems - and their solutions - have been framed.

One argument relates to their *flawed characters*: elected politicians are ‘self-serving’ (Osborne, 2007) and/ or ‘overpaid and dishonest’ (Guido Fawkes, 2009) – an argument reinforced by the stories of many MPs during the Westminster expenses scandal in 2009 (House of Commons, 2010: 3). There is evidence of a marked public belief in the corruption of public institutions, which peaked in 2009 (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2014: 6-7), and of low public trust in politicians, and their motives, during the last 30 years (Ipsos MORI, 2013; Lee and Young, 2014: 70). This problem can prompt an *institutional* response, such as the production of common standards for all MPs, and a right of recall for individual MPs (Judge, 2013).

A second argument is that many candidates have no roots in their local constituencies – a charge often linked to the practices of national party offices to place preferred candidates in seats when they become available, and media glee when non-local candidates are caught out in hustings (Childs and Cowley, 2011: 6; Rush, 2001a: 204).

A third argument relates to their *inexperience of the real world*: politicians are increasingly unlikely to hold ‘proper jobs’ before being elected. Instead, they are recruited from an increasingly narrow pool of ‘politics facilitating’ occupations. In the past, *brokerage* occupations were relatively conducive to political life. These are the jobs – including lawyers, teachers, and lecturers - providing general skills, such as articulacy, or advantages, such as a link to the local community, flexible hours or proximity to Westminster. There has been a long-term rise in recruitment from *instrumental* occupations, ‘which have a clearer link to politics and may be used as a stepping stone towards elected office’, such as MP and party assistants, and members of think tanks or interest groups sympathetic to particular parties (Cairney, 2007: 214). These jobs support potential candidates until they are elected, since candidacy is an increasingly time-consuming task, and, in

many cases, help them become elected, because they give them essential links to party recruitment. Indeed, an even smaller pool, from jobs related directly to Westminster or government, may come to be described as *promotion-facilitating* since they appear to help newly elected MPs achieve rapid promotion within their parties (Cowley, 2012; Allen, 2013). Consequently, ‘the political class inhabits its own bubble, utterly divorced from the lives of voters’ (McKinstry, 2014).

This is also an argument in which blame is generally attributed to *political parties*. Indeed, UKIP has made great play of the inability of other parties to represent ‘ordinary’ members of the public (Aaranovitch, 2004; Ford and Goodwin, 2014). Its 2014 European Parliament election material, in particular, stressed its ability to represent an alternative to the ‘political class’, criticising other parties for having too many candidates with jobs related directly to politics, and having gone to similar schools and Oxford University - a commonly-used proxy to describe a political or ruling class drawn from the same narrow pool of recruitment:

We’ve just about had enough of a career class of politician ... Look at the three so-called ‘big parties’ and look at their front benches. They are made up of people who go to the same handful of schools, they all go to Oxford, they all get a degree in PPE ... then they all get a job as a researcher in a political office, they become Members of Parliament at 27 or 28, Cabinet ministers in their early 40s, and I put it to you that this country is now run by a bunch of college kids who have never done a proper day’s work in their lives (Nigel Farage, UKIP leader, 2nd May 2014 - Taylor, 2014).

Occupational background is one element of a fourth argument: that elected politicians, as a group, *do not reflect the social background of the voting population*. The social backgrounds of the political class are similar, with elected representatives - and, to some extent, the officials on which they rely and members of the interest groups with which they interact - much more likely to be white, male, privately educated, and graduates of elite Universities, than the general population (Keating and Cairney, 2006; Cairney, 2007; McGuinness, 2010). Again, much of the responsibility may still be placed on political parties, as the organisations providing the demand for candidates, but there can also be an institutional response to address the incentives regarding supply. For example, Westminster is criticised regularly, in the academy, press, social media, and Parliament for the many ways in which it undermines the incentives for women and minorities to engage (Lovenduski, 2005: 26-8; McVeigh, 2014; House of Commons, 2010).

Crucially, it is difficult to reconcile these four arguments to produce one strategy for political reform. Indeed, they can produce debates on important trade-offs, such as when all women short lists (AWS) coordinated by a national party are criticised or rejected by local constituency offices and candidates (Childs and Cowley, 2011: 2-3; Evans, 2008: 599). Instead, each legislature has produced its own plans to address corruption and MP behaviour, leaving most issues regarding local and social background to political parties. Further, political parties differ markedly in their attitude, with Labour the most likely to seek formal ways to increase its representation of women, and the Conservatives more focused on avoiding ‘professional politicians’ and finding candidates who have ‘proved themselves’ outside politics (Cairney, 2007: 218-9), often largely at the expense of local candidates (Childs and Cowley, 2011: 6).

This problem represents important context to the discussion of new venues for elected representation. When we compare multi-level legislatures, to explore the effect of party strategies

during Westminster, European, Scottish and Welsh elections, it is important to highlight which, of several, aspects of social background each party focuses its efforts.

The Election of Women and Men: was there a devolution effect?

It is in this category that we expect to see the greatest devolution effect. Women have long been under-represented in Westminster, especially when compared to some other European, and many international, legislatures (Cotta and Best, 2000; Duckworth et al, 2014). Traditional explanations for these discrepancies relate to issues of: *demand*, including the powerful role of individual constituency parties in candidate selection and unwillingness of the central party leadership to challenge the prerogative of local branches (Rush and Cromwell, 2000); or *supply*, as the demands of unpaid campaigning work clash with employment and caring responsibilities, and/ or Westminster is perceived to be an unwelcome environment for women (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Lovenduski, 2005: 26-8; Ashe et al, 2010: 458-9). Incumbency of MPs helps maintain gender gaps in Westminster, while the devolved legislatures allowed for a new start in 1999. Proportional representation gives more selection power to the party centre in balancing candidate lists, and measures were taken, including family-friendly hours, to make devolved assemblies ‘more attractive for women than life at Westminster’ (Stirbu, 2012: 33; Malley, 2012).

The clearest stated aim in Scotland, by bodies such as the Scottish Constitutional Convention, related to the representation of women, with ‘a vaguer commitment to representativeness on other dimensions’ such as education, age and previous political background (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 43; Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 105; Shephard et al, 2001). Similar pre-devolution aims can be found in Wales – as can a common commitment to ‘family friendly working patterns’ (McAllister, 2000: 594) - although ‘the debate never took on a gender perspective in quite the way it did in Scotland’ (Russell et al, 2002b: 53; Chaney et al, 2007).

There is no direct equivalent in the European Parliament to this push for political reform, but it is an arena with a greater proportion of women compared to most national parliaments – a development that Freedman (2002) links to several potential explanations: positive (its image as a “more ‘woman friendly’ environment”), negative (its image as a low status arena) and practical, since national parties, not local offices, control selection, and it is easier for parties to alternate men and women when using a PR list system.

In contrast, the 2010 Westminster election has been described as a wasted opportunity (Ashe et al, 2010; Campbell and Childs, 2010). There could have been a large rise in women MPs, following a commitment by the major political parties to select more women, an unusual amount of contested seats following the 2009 expenses scandal, and the formation of a Speaker’s Conference in Westminster to examine widening access to political recruitment, focusing on gender, ethnicity and disability (House of Commons, 2010). Yet, it rose from 20% to 22%. The experience prompted Childs and Evans (2012) to argue for sex quotas for the 2015 election (see also Wangnerud, 2009: 55). This did not happen, but we did witness a rise to 29% (191 of 650) in 2015, including a rise to 43% (99 of 232) in Labour and 36% (20 of 56) in the new group of SNP MPs (Bengtsson et al, 2015; Lowther and Thornton, 2015).

Table 1 highlights a mixed devolved effect. It is most notable in the National Assembly for Wales – the only assembly to achieve a 50/50 split, in 2003, before the number of women fell to 42% by

2011. The effect is less marked in Scotland, in which the proportion of women peaked at 40% in 2003, before falling in 2007 and 2011 to a level – 33% and 34.9% - now eclipsed by the European Parliament (the Northern Ireland Assembly is currently 19%, and the London Assembly 32% - Duckworth et al, 2014: 3).

Table 1: Women MPs as % of total in each legislature (by year)

	Election 1	Election 2	Election 3	Election 4
House of Commons	18.2 (1997)	17.9 (2001)	19.8 (2005)	22.0 (2010)
Scottish Parliament	37.2 (1999)	39.5 (2003)	33.3 (2007)	34.9 (2011)
Welsh Assembly	40.0 (1999)	50.0 (2003)	46.7 (2007)	40.0 (2011)
MEPs	26.2 (1999)	25.6 (2004)	33.3 (2009)	41.0 (2014)

Note: the proportion of women in the House of Commons rose to 29% in 2015.

There are important differences by political party (Table 2). Only Labour appeared to be engaged fully in recruitment reform, according to three measures - equality rhetoric, equality measures, and equality guarantees such as all-women shortlists (AWS) - and its relative likelihood of placing women candidates in winnable seats (Ashe et al, 2010: 456-7; 470-4). In the 1990s, Labour made the first significant attempts to increase the representation of women MPs in Westminster, firstly through the introduction of AWS at local level, and later through softer targets that did not contravene new equality legislation, until it passed the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to legalize AWS (Russell et al, 2002: 4; Squires, 2010: 83; Rush and Cromwell, 2000; Stolz, 2009). This was followed by a more concerted effort from the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to increase their female representation in the 2000s, resulting in a steady but rather slow increase in the proportion of female MPs – caused partly by a continued reluctance to use AWS or, in many cases, challenge local constituency offices. A classic Liberal Democrat argument is that quotas favouring one social group are illiberal (Evans, 2008: 599-602).

Consequently, the Labour Party has most of Westminster’s women MPs (81 of 143 in 2010, rising to 99 of 191 in 2015), and women constituted 31% and 43% of the parliamentary party in 2010 and 2015. The Conservatives saw the biggest increase in women MPs between the 2005 and 2010 elections (from 17 to 49), but this was still only 16% of the parliamentary party (Criddle, 2010). In 2015 it rose to 68 of 331 (20%).

Table 2: Women MPs by Party 1997-2015

	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015
Labour	101 (24.2%)	95 (23.0%)	98 (27.6%)	81 (31.4%)	99 (42.7%)
Conservatives	13 (7.9%)	14 (8.5%)	17 (8.6%)	49 (16.0%)	68 (20.5%)

Lib Dems	3 (6.5%)	5 (10.9%)	10 (16.1%)	7 (12.3%)	0 (0%)
Total	120 (18.2%)	118 (17.9%)	128 (19.8%)	143 (22.0%)	191 (29.4%)

Note: women account for 20 of 56 (36%) SNP MPs in 2015. Many played a key role in the campaign group *Women for Independence*; The Liberal Democrats had 8 MPs in 2015.

Labour also took a central role in vetting devolved candidates (Russell et al, 2002b: 56; Cairney, 2011: 29-31; McAllister, 2000: 596). It expected, correctly, that it would win most of its Scottish Parliament seats in 1999 through first-past-the-post constituency seats rather than the party list, and so it introduced ‘twinned constituencies’ with one male and one female candidate (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 227). Yet, it was the only party to do so (Mackay and Kenny, 2007: 86-7). It also alternated candidates on its regional lists, but with men heading most of them, at a time when Labour elected very few regional candidates (2007: 87). The share of women Labour MSPs has fallen in recent elections but remains closer to parity than all other parties (Table 3). Its experience contrasts with the Liberal Democrats, who made a similar commitment *in principle* to the representation of women before devolution, but used ‘half hearted’ measures to do so (Kenny and MacKay, 2013: 8; Cairney, 2011: 30).

The Scottish National Party had ‘an informal rule of thumb that [regional] lists should be more-or less gender balanced’ (Mackay and Kenny, 2007: 87), partly as a response to Labour’s initiative in 1999 and to address its relative lack of appeal to women (Kenny and MacKay, 2013: 8), but it rejected twinning in 1998 (Russell et al, 2002b: 59-60). It increased its share of seats after the 2007 and 2011 elections, but the proportion of women MSPs dropped from 43% in 1999 to 28% in 2011, partly because its balance between regional/constituency seats changed from 28/7 to 16/53 (Cairney, 2011: 28). The Conservatives did not introduce equality measures but often ensured that women ‘were generally placed in favourable positions on the party lists’ (Kenny and MacKay, 2013: 9). Female representation has increased among the smaller parties in Scotland, including the Green Party which has relatively strong equality measures, but not enough to offset the decline in women MSPs from large parties (there were 3 ‘other’ MSPs in 2011, down from 17 in 2003). Notably, although gender equality was high on the agenda before 1999, it rarely featured in the independence debate, and progress on representation was largely ‘brought about more by accident than design’ (Kenny, 2014: 328).

Table 3: Women Members of Scottish Parliament, by Party

	1999	2003	2007	2011
Labour	28 (50.0%)	28 (56.0%)	23 (50.0%)	17 (45.9%)
SNP	15 (42.9%)	9 (33.3%)	12 (25.5%)	19 (27.5%)
Lib Dems	2 (11.8%)	2 (11.8%)	2 (12.5%)	1 (20.0%)
Conservatives	3 (16.7%)	4 (22.2%)	5 (31.2%)	6 (40.0%)
Total (n=129)	48 (37.2%)	51 (39.5%)	43 (33.3%)	45 (34.9%)

There is generally more representation of women in the Welsh Assembly (see Table 4), an outcome made more significant by the previous lack of women MPs in Wales and the ‘bitter’ tensions within Welsh Labour about twinning constituencies (Russell et al, 2002b: 51; 58-9; Chaney, 2007). The proportion of women is generally higher than in Scotland, partly because it was well over 50/50 in Labour from 1999-2007, Welsh Labour has not suffered the same electoral losses, Plaid Cymru put women first and third on regional seats, and the Liberal Democrats had more success with its more flexible system than in Scotland (Russell et al, 2002b: 50; 62). The Conservatives ‘rejected positive action altogether’ in early elections (2002b), but oversaw rises in 2011 in both constituency (2 of 6) and regional (2 of 8) seats.

Table 4: Women Welsh Assembly Members by Party 1999-2011 (expressed in % terms)

	1999	2003	2007	2011
Labour	15 (53.6%)	19 (63.3%)	16 (61.5%)	15 (50.0%)
Plaid Cymru	6 (35.3%)	6 (50.0%)	7 (46.7%)	4 (36.4%)
Lib Dems	3 (50.0%)	3 (50.0%)	3 (50.0%)	1 (20.0%)
Conservatives	0	2 (18.2%)	1 (8.3%)	4 (28.6%)
Total (n=60)	24 (40.0%)	30 (50.0%)	28 (46.7%)	24 (40.0%)

The UK’s proportion of women in the European Parliament – 41% - now eclipses the Scottish Parliament and is almost at the same level as the Welsh Assembly (Table 5).^{vi} The 2014 level rose primarily because 55% of Labour’s MEPs are women, supported by smaller parties such as the Greens (2 of 3 MEPs), who also placed women at or near the top of their lists. The success of UKIP, now the UK party with the most MEPs (24 of 73), and the continued relatively low proportion of women among Conservative MEPs, offsets this rise.

Table 5: Number of Women MEPs by Party (and %)

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
Labour	13 (21.0%)	11 (37.9%)	7 (37%)	5 (38%)	11 (55.0%)
Conservative	2 (11.1%)	3 (8.3%)	2 (7%)	6 (25%)	6 (31.6%)
Lib Dems	0 (of 2)	5 (50%)	6 (50%)	7 (58%)	1 (100%)
UKIP	-	0 (of 3)	0 (of 12)	2 (15%)	7 (29.2%)
Other	1 (25.0%)	3 (50%)	4 (50%)	5 (50%)	5 (55.6%)
Total	16 (18.4%)	22 (25.3%)	19 (24%)	25 (35%)	30 (41%)

Note: Other in 2014 is 5/9 - Democratic Unionist 1/1, Green 2/3, Plaid Cymru, 1/1, SNP 0/2, Ulster Unionist 0/1. N=87 (1994, 1999), 74 (2004), 72 (2009) and 73 (2014). Sources: Centre for Women and Democracy (2014: 3), Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics (2010), Russell et al (2002a: 30).

Formative Occupations: a general rise in ‘politics-facilitating’ posts?

A central part of our data collection is to code the occupations of British legislators at multiple levels, selecting a *formative occupation based primarily on the length of time spent in that role*. We group these occupations into five categories: Professional, Business, Blue-and-White Collar, Politics-Facilitating, and Miscellaneous. This allows us to present data that Cairney (2007) has made broadly comparable to previous studies in the British General Election Series, and studies of Scottish devolution (Keating, 1975; Keating and Cairney, 2006). We uphold the distinction between *brokerage* roles that facilitate entry to politics but also generally require formal professional qualifications (such as teachers, lecturers, lawyers, accountants); and *instrumental* roles that offer a more direct route to political work with lower entry requirements and professional expertise geared towards the requirements of modern politics (such as political workers, trade unionists, journalists, think tank researchers, full-time councillors). Our politics-facilitating category is restricted to the instrumental roles, largely to link our discussion to the idea that Westminster is increasingly populated by people who have never had ‘proper jobs’ before becoming MPs.^{vii} We group blue and white collar positions together, since their numbers are now so low and the status of many of these occupations is often indistinguishable in the modern economy (see Keating and Cairney, 2006: 45), and keep the miscellaneous category to a minimum.

Historically speaking, the most striking finding from our data is the small proportion of parliamentarians in all legislatures with a formative occupation as blue or white collar workers (Table 6). In Westminster, the decline has been accelerated by the retirement of working-class Labour MPs (from 1945-70, 42% were blue/ white collar), and their replacement with middle-class university-educated colleagues (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 46; Criddle, 2010). In all other legislatures, the number was low to begin with and has not increased significantly since (Keating and Cairney, 2006; Stolz, 2009). In other words, using this measure, devolved and European Parliament elections generally accelerate a trend away from social representation.

Another trend is the continued growth of legislators with instrumental ‘politics-facilitating’ formative occupations. This is now between one-quarter and one-third in all UK legislatures. Many other legislators also spent some time working in a politics-facilitating role, either before or after their formative occupation, so are accustomed to the experience of full-time political activity before joining parliament (Cairney, 2007). All three main party leaders in Westminster (David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg) spent their formative occupation in politics-facilitating roles before entering parliament.

Table 6 – Formative Occupation (By Legislature)

%	MPs (2010)	MEPs (2014)	MSPs (2011)	AMs (2011)
Professional	34.4	28.8	33.1	40.7
Business	25.7	30.1	17.7	18.6

Blue/White Collar	5.2	5.5	9.7	1.7
Politics-Facilitating	29.3	26.0	28.2	32.2
Miscellaneous	5.4	9.6	11.3	6.8

Note: (1) The instrumental occupations are: Political worker; full-time trade union official; journalist, author, television or media worker; public relations; quango director or senior official; legislator in a different level of government (MP, MEP, MSP, AM); full-time councillor or mayor; interest or professional group or think tank.

Inter-party differences are noticeable (Table 7). The instrumental formative occupations now represent the largest single category for Labour MPs, displacing the professions as the main recruiting ground for the party. Among Liberal Democrats, an almost identical number of MPs have their formative experience in ‘politics-facilitating’ jobs as in the professions. The Conservatives continue to buck the trend when we analyse formative occupations alone, although ‘instrumental’ posts are more apparent in their second or third occupations (Cairney, 2007: 227). Business (43.8%) is now the most important formative occupation, while Conservative MPs have traditionally been recruited more from brokerage posts (included in the Professional category) such as barristers or solicitors than instrumental occupations (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 47; Cairney, 2007). Business and law combine to provide over 60% of Conservative recruitment. By contrast, 19% of Liberal Democrats and less than 7% of Labour MPs have their formative occupation in business.

Table 7 – Formative Occupation of MPs, by Party, 2010

%	MPs	Labour	Conservatives	Lib. Dems.
Professional	34.4	36.8	31.6	34.5
Business	25.7	6.7	43.8	19.0
Blue/White Collar	5.2	8.7	3.5	1.7
Politics-Facilitating	29.3	40.3	18.9	32.8
Miscellaneous	5.4	7.9	2.2	12.1

Note: the instrumental figures for Labour were 23.3% in 1945, 21.0% in Oct 1974 and 31.5% in 2005 (with trade union backgrounds less prominent over time); for the Conservatives the figures are significantly lower at 2.8% in 1945, 9.7% in Oct 1974 and 12.9% in 2005 (recruitment from barristers or solicitors was 19.3%, 20.2% and 19.1% respectively) (Cairney, 2007: 225).

Before devolution, there were significant differences in the backgrounds of MPs from Scotland and England, across all the parties (Keating, 1975). Scottish Labour MPs were more likely to be working class than their counterparts from England, while the Scottish Conservatives were more likely than English Conservatives to be from upper class, landed and military backgrounds. In the case of the Conservatives, these differences increased during the post-war period as the Scottish Conservatives lost their urban support base and retreated to the country. Among Labour MPs, there was a steady reduction in the working class component but the Scotland-England difference survived. The immediate effect of devolution was to reverse this difference among Labour

politicians, with Labour MSPs more middle class than both Scottish and non-Scottish MPs (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 46).

Despite the short history of devolution in Scotland, there is already a significant trend in the instrumental category. The proportion of MSPs with a formative occupation among the professions fell from over half to just under a third of the legislature (Table 8). Meanwhile, the proportion of MSPs with a formative occupation in politics-facilitating roles has increased by more than half (or ten percentage points, from 18.1% to 28.2%) since the first Scottish election. The ‘professionals’ outnumbered the ‘professional politicians’ by almost three to one in 1999 but they are now close to parity.

Table 8: Formative Occupation of MSPs, 1999-2011

	1999	2003	2007	2011
Professions	51.2	49.6	45.0	33.1
Business	17.3	14.0	15.5	17.7
Politics-Facilitating	18.1	24.8	23.3	28.2
Blue and White Collar	3.9	3.9	7.0	9.7
Miscellaneous	5.5	7.8	8.5	11.3

Of the 2011 parliamentary contingent, 30% of SNP MSPs and 36% of Labour MSPs have a formative occupation in politics-facilitating roles (Table 9). Yet, in other respects, the professional background of SNP and Labour MSPs are quite different: one in four SNP MSPs have a formative experience in business, while no Labour MSPs come under this category. Labour MSPs are also much more likely to come from a public sector background (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 49) and still have a significant blue/white collar background. The low presence of the Conservatives in Scotland (15-18 of 129 seats) limits cross-comparisons, but we can identify low recruitment from instrumental occupations in favour of professionals, business and farmer/ landowners (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 47). The Liberal Democrats currently have a minimal presence in Scotland (5 MSPs).

Table 9: Formative Occupation of MSPs by Party (% terms), 2011

%	MSPs (129)	SNP (69)	Labour (37)	Conservatives (15)
Professional	33.1	35.7	36.1	53.3
Business	17.7	25.0	0	40.0
Politics-Facilitating	28.2	30.4	36.1	6.7

Blue/White Collar	9.7	8.9	19.4	0
Miscellaneous	11.3	16.1	8.3	0

The professions and politics-facilitating roles are also the largest categories of formative occupation among Welsh Assembly members (Table 10), although the latter has always been higher than in Scotland, and the trends between categories are less dramatic, before reaching a similar outcome in 2011.

Table 10 – Formative Experience of AMs 1999-2011 (% terms)

	1999	2003	2007	2011
Professions	50.0	46.7	36.7	40.7
Business	16.7	20.0	18.3	18.6
Politics-Facilitating	28.3	30.0	38.3	32.2
Blue and White Collar Workers	0.0	0.0	1.7	1.7
Miscellaneous	5.0	3.3	5.0	6.8

Labour AMs are still more likely to have a formative experience among the professions, which account for almost half the party total, a significantly higher proportion than in Scotland (Table 11). The Conservatives maintain a consistent picture, with half drawn from business while, at 54.5%, the politics-facilitating element in Plaid Cymru is striking.

Table 11 : Formative Occupation of MWAs by Party (% terms), 2011

%	MWAs (60)	Labour (30)	Conservatives (14)	Plaid Cymru (11)
Professional	40.7	48.3	21.4	36.4
Business	18.6	10.3	50.0	0
Politics-Facilitating	32.2	37.9	21.4	54.5
Blue and White Collar Workers	1.7	3.4	0	0
Miscellaneous	6.8	3.4	7.1	9.1

In European Elections, the 2014 data (Table 12) confirm Labour's heavy reliance on the politics-facilitating professions: 50% (half of which have trade union backgrounds) plus 20% with a charity/voluntary sector background (which often involves political campaigning). The Conservatives remain more likely to be drawn from business (executive, not business owner, backgrounds). UKIP's profile tends to be roughly similar, but with even fewer in the 'politics facilitating category' and more small business owners in the business category (7 of 24) - which helps back up one of Nigel Farage's claims to distinctive candidates.

Table 12: Formative Occupation of MEPs by Party (% terms), 2014

% (n)	MEPs (73)	Conservatives (19)	Labour (20)	UKIP (24)
Professional	28.8	36.8	25.0	20.8
Business	30.1	31.6	5.0	50.0
Politics-Facilitating	26.0	26.2	50.0	12.5
Blue and White Collar Workers	5.5	5.3	0	12.5
Miscellaneous	9.6	0	20.0	4.2

Educational Background: an elite drawn from private schools and Oxbridge?

In this category it is more difficult to gauge the devolution effect because the education backgrounds of MPs, MSPs and AMs are not directly comparable. The critique of MPs is that they are much more likely than the population to be drawn from a small number of private schools, such as Eton, and be graduates of Oxford or Cambridge University. This is a feature of post-war governments, and Conservative governments in particular. For example, of Thatcher's first government, 91% went to private school (27% Eton) and 77% Oxbridge. Under Blair, this fell to 41% (0% Eton) and 23%, but under Cameron it rose to 52% (4%) and 65% (Crone, 2011; see also Scott, 1991). In Westminster as a whole (Table 13), the proportion attending private schools (33.8%) and Oxbridge (26%) is far lower than in the UK Government, and has fallen somewhat in the post-war period (Criddle, 2010), but is still markedly different from the UK population, of which under 7% attend private schools (Independent Schools Council, 2014; Department for Education, 2012) and less than 0.5% graduated from Oxbridge. The post-war rise in MPs with a University degree (Rush and Cromwell, 2000) - now 82%, or 90% including FE college qualifications - has also outstripped the rise in the general public, of which 38% are HE or FE graduates (Office for National Statistics, 2013: 2).

Table 13: Educational Background of Legislators (expressed in % terms)

	MPs (2010)	MEPs (2014)	MSPs (2011)	AMs (2011)
State School	66.2	71.6	84.9	89.3
Private School	33.8	28.4	15.1	10.7
Oxbridge	26.0	17.8	1.6	6.7
Other HE	55.6	52.1	68.5	68.3
Other FE	9.4	4.1	13.7	5.0
None	9.1	26.0	16.9	20.0

Note: preliminary academic/ media analysis suggests that levels of private and Oxbridge education in MPs fell in 2015 (Bengtsson et al, 2015) but their figures are not directly comparable to ours.

This profile was *generally* matched by MEPs in 2014, with 28.4% attending private school and 17.8% Oxbridge, partly reflecting the similarities in recruitment in the UK among the main parties (although, generally, far more Conservative than Labour MEPs are educated privately) and no major divergence in the smaller parties. However, the major difference is with UKIP higher education: almost half (11 of 24) of their MEPs have *no* further or higher education (3 were educated in Oxbridge and 10 at other universities). Its level of private education (at least 6 of 24 MEPs) is less distinctive.

There are also marked differences with the devolved legislatures. 15.1% of MSPs and 10.7% of AMs are privately educated, well below any of the parties in Westminster (although still markedly higher than the general population). If we consider the proportion of legislators with a university degree, then the differences between legislatures are perhaps less pronounced, with over 70% holding a university degree in all legislatures. However, legislators with no higher or further education varies, from one in four (European Parliament) and one in five (Welsh Assembly) to one in ten (Westminster).

Many of the devolved differences can be explained by the relative strength of the parties. The Conservatives are much weaker there, but have recently grown in strength in Westminster, which explains, for example, an overall rise in private school backgrounds at Westminster from 29.6% in 2001 to 33.8% in 2010. Table 14 shows the similarity between the Westminster governing parties, with the Conservative and Liberal Democrats displaying unusually high levels of private school (49.5% and 41.4%) and Oxbridge backgrounds (34.6% and 28.1%). This contrasts markedly with Labour (16.3% and 17.5%), which has a stronger presence in Scotland and Wales.

Table 14 – Education of MPs, by Party, 2010

%	Westminster	Conservative	Labour	Lib. Dems.
State School	66.2	50.5	83.7	58.6
Private School	33.8	49.5	16.3	41.4
Oxbridge	26.0	34.6	17.5	28.1

Other HE	55.6	49.8	62.2	54.4
Other FE	9.4	7.1	11.7	7.0
None	9.1	8.4	8.6	10.5

Beyond these party differences, we find a mixed picture. Levels of private schooling are higher for all parties in Westminster than in the devolved legislatures (with minor exceptions). In 2010, Scottish MPs became slightly less likely to be Oxbridge educated than their MSP counterparts, an unusual finding that says more about the small numbers (compare with Keating and Cairney, 2006: 48). Scotland also has its own version of recruitment from a small number of ‘Ancient’ Universities, with, for example, one-quarter of MSPs graduating from Glasgow University (Leask, 2014), which also supplied a disproportionate number of MPs between 1945 and 1974 (Keating, 1975). The SNP has similar levels of private schooling (Table 14), and its unusually low level of HE/ FE background is not a consistent feature, as only 7% of its MSPs had no HE/ FE in 2003 (Keating and Cairney, 2006: 49).

Table 14: Educational Background of Scottish Legislators

%	Scotland MPs	Scotland Labour MPs	MSPs	Labour MSPs	SNP MSPs
State School	91.0	94.7	84.9	86.7	88.0
Private School	8.9	5.3	15.1	13.3	12.0
Oxbridge	1.7	0.0	1.6	0.0	2.9
Other HE	77.6	75.0	68.5	72.7	63.7
Other FE	13.8	12.5	13.7	21.2	11.6
None	8.6	12.5	16.9	6.1	21.7

Note: the background of MPs may change significantly following a rise of SNP MPs from 6 to 56 of 59 in 2010 and 2015.

The Oxbridge presence is more noticeable among MPs from Wales, in contrast to its minimal presence in the backgrounds of AMs (Table 15). AMs are also less likely to have received private schooling, and any higher or further education than MPs, although still much more likely than the general population.

Table 15: Educational Background of Welsh Legislators

%	Wales MPs	Wales Labour MPs	AMs	Labour AMs
State School	85.0	84.6	89.3	89.7

Private School	15.0	15.4	10.7	10.3
Oxbridge	17.5	23.1	6.7	6.7
Other HE	70.0	65.3	68.3	70.0
Other FE	7.5	7.7	5.0	0.0
None	5.0	3.8	20.0	23.3

Conclusions: convergence towards a political class, or distinctive systems?

The idea of a ‘political class’ is nebulous and used as shorthand for too many ills associated with representative government. Our focus on multiple levels, and multiple parties, adds nuance to the broad argument that the UK has a political class that is increasingly homogeneous and detached from the real world.

When political parties address the ‘political class’ problem, they often seek to solve different problems, producing considerable variation: Labour is more likely to pursue a greater number of women MPs, while the Conservatives (and UKIP) focus more on encouraging people who have proved themselves in areas such as business. There are also historic differences that set the parties apart: the Conservatives are still much more likely to be drawn from private schools and Oxbridge.

The popular argument, that a political class contains a cadre of people with a set of characteristics – they attend private school, Oxbridge and their formative career is in an instrumental occupation – is false, largely because it conflates two very different party experiences: the Conservatives who are more likely to have attended private schools and Oxbridge, and Labour MPs, more likely to have a formative career in an instrumental post. Only 29 (4.5%) of 650 MSPs meet all three criteria. The appearance of a trend is explained by the fact that many are, or were, senior members of the UK Government, including David Cameron (PM), Nick Clegg (Deputy PM), and George Osborne (Chancellor) (plus former Secretaries of State, Michael Gove, Education, and Chris Huhne, Energy and Climate Change).

Many of these party differences are magnified in the European and devolved parliaments. Most notably, Labour has achieved far greater success in electing women in these new arenas by using the relatively centralised party lists in the European Parliament, and mixing twinned constituencies and alternated party lists in devolved parliaments. The relative absence of the Conservatives in the devolved arenas also reinforces differences in educational background, with MSPs and AMs far less likely to have attended private school or Oxford or Cambridge University, although Scotland appears to have its own narrow pool of recruitment from Glasgow and Edinburgh.

However, it is difficult to conclude that new devolved institutions have allowed established political parties to ‘break the mould’ or reverse historical trends in representation. When we consider long-term historical changes in electoral recruitment, we find broad convergence: university-educated professionals have replaced the landed gentry as the primary recruiting ground for the parliamentary elite (Cotta and Best, 2000). This has produced a new type of political class, but not one that is representative of the general population. Elected representatives are far more likely to enjoy high

levels of university education and are increasingly likely to have a formative occupation in a narrowly defined ‘politics-facilitating’ role. Very few politicians have a blue or white collar background, despite this representing the largest category in the general population.

Devolution has reinforced many of these trends. A university education is now almost a standard requirement for UK legislators. Even if members of the devolved legislatures are less likely to have attended Oxbridge universities, the vast majority in all legislatures are graduates, present in more than double the rate of graduation in the general population. Relatively low levels of private education are explained, to some extent, by differences in the party composition of each legislature.

The changing, more centralised, nature of political communication, and the narrow basis for party recruitment, is often more pronounced outside Westminster. The rise of legislators with a formative experience in narrowly defined ‘politics-facilitating’ roles is a common feature of the devolved legislatures where they now challenge the professions as the primary recruiting ground. The ‘instrumental’ politics facilitating category accounts for almost one-third of the background of elected representatives in both arenas; and, blue and white-collar background generally account for 10%, bar the recent exception of Labour MSPs. However, the unusually high success of UKIP in 2014 has made an overall difference to the background of MEPs, upsetting a longer term trend towards more politics-facilitating posts.

The most striking difference between legislatures remains the representation of women, with Westminster lagging behind newer legislatures. Much of the variation can be attributed to party differences.^{viii} The rise of the SNP and Plaid Cymru in the new legislatures has reduced the share of female legislators, and only Labour retains an active commitment to achieving gender parity. Moreover, the drive to recruit more women has not been accompanied by a similar effort to ensure a political class that is more broadly representative of the population in social terms - although we have found no evidence to suggest that it *exacerbates* these broader problems of representation (a point reinforced by Allen et al. 2014). Overall, new levels of elected representation have not reversed the trend to a narrower recruitment base. They have not produced a new, distinctive ‘political class’.

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ⁱ We wrote this article before the UK general election in 2015. Although it is too soon to analyse this new intake in sufficient depth, we update the analysis of gender (but leave the tables – except table 2 - untouched) and note the rise in Conservative and SNP MPs at the expense of the Liberal Democrats and Labour.

ⁱⁱ We leave the Northern Ireland Assembly out of our analysis for several reasons. The Assembly was effectively suspended for much of its brief history, while many of its legislators held a dual mandate in the Westminster Parliament. The long-standing decision of British parties to avoid contesting elections in Northern Ireland also makes it of less value for comparative purposes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, for example, the new devolved context did not appear, at least initially, to provide the same level of opportunity systematically to increase representation for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) candidates. From 1999-2007 there were no BAME MSPs, from 2007-11 there was one, and from 2011 there were two – representing 1.6% of MSPs in a country with a 2% BAME population (Cairney, 2011: 244; see also Williams and De Lima, 2006). In 2010, in Westminster, BAME MPs accounted for 4% in a country with an 8% BAME population (Squires, 2010: 82). In 2015 it rose to 6.6% (Bengtsson et al, 2015).

^{iv} Individual data on legislators was obtained from personal, institutional, or party websites; relevant entries in Who's Who; and biographies of new MPs in the Madano Partnership (2010) report. Any further information was obtained through direct contact with the legislator concerned. Other studies also collect information on candidates, such as the *Parliamentary Candidates UK* project (<http://parliamentarycandidates.org/>) and the Sutton Trust (2015).

^v Our data does not take into account changes of composition during the legislature.

^{vi} Women account for 37% of all MEPs (Duckworth et al, 2014: 1).

^{vii} Therefore, it will not pick up on politicians who held an instrumental post as a 'stepping stone' immediately before becoming elected.

^{viii} Although we do not provide the statistical analysis to compare the relative effects of arenas and party strategies.