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FORWARD THINKING

The further rise of the career politician

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Abstract Political careers have changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Still, political science research has yet to fully quantify this development. Building on existing literature on career politicians, this study uses a handful of indicators introduced by King (Br J Polit Sci 11(3):249–285, 1981), a new variable (pre-parliamentary occupations), and an original data set compiled by the author. The paper's contribution to the literature is threefold. Firstly, using the variables introduced by King, it observes that a plateau in the number of career politicians has been reached. Secondly, when looking at the occupational background of politicians, the data show a further rise in career politicians. Thirdly, this development is especially prevalent among cabinet ministers.

Keywords British politics · Political careers · Political recruitment

Introduction

Political careers have changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Political science has tried to keep up with this development by looking at the professionalisation of politics (Squire 1992, 1993, 2007), the convergence of political careers across countries (Best and Cotta 2000), the representation of women and minorities (Lovenduski and Norris 1994; Norris 1997; Durose et al. 2013; Allen and Cutts 2016; Homola 2017) and pre-parliamentary professions (Allen 2012; Cairney 2007; Goplerud 2013; Cairney et al. 2016). Recent work on party leaders (Cowley 2012; Barber 2014) shows a changing landscape at the top of politics. A quick look at the Labour leaders—Clement Attlee, Tony Blair and Ed Miliband, for example—reveals three very different personal

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profiles: Attlee, the trained lawyer turned social worker and WWI veteran; Blair, the barrister who quickly directed his attention to politics; and Miliband, the speech writer and political researcher. A similar case can be made for the Conservative trio of Margaret Thatcher, a barrister; William Hague, a management consultant; and David Cameron, a political researcher. This has led to many commentators and even MPs claiming that politics today lacks 'real people' (Guardian 2014; Statesman 2015; Telegraph 2015). Allen and Cairney (2015) discuss these complaints about the changing 'political class' and identify three key concepts: political careerism, political professionalisation and the political elite. This paper aims to contribute to this discussion on political class by providing evidence on the changing political careerism over the last 30 years with the help of evidence from the other two concepts, political professionalisation and the political elite.

The concept of *career politicians* (King 1981; Mattozzi and Merlo 2008; Cowley 2012) describes individuals who see politics as their calling and build a career around it. They are committed to politics, enter the political sphere early in their life and stay there for a long time. In his canonical paper, King analyses the characteristics of MPs and cabinet ministers from the 1930s to the late 1970s. He concludes that there is a significant rise in career politicians insofar as MPs retire later, fight more unsuccessful elections before entering parliament for the first time, and typically become MPs in their thirties (King 1981).

Broadly speaking, this paper examines whether or not there has been a further rise in so–called 'career politicians' over the last three decades. More specifically, it revisits and updates King's study by investigating recent developments in political careers using the variables this established. It then examines whether the concepts of political professionalisation and political elites can contribute to the analysis of political careerism by looking at previous occupation and focusing on cabinet members.

The study speaks to an extensive literature of institutional political science (Black 1972; Rosenzweig 1957; Schlesinger 1966; Weber 1919) by shining a light on the politician as a key actor. It does so in the tradition of studies that investigate the individual characteristics of decision-makers (Bell et al. 1961; Durose et al. 2013; Lamprinakou et al. 2017; Norris 1997; Squire 1993) in general and career politicians in particular (Cowley 2012; King 1981). The study specifically contributes to the recent literature on political class (Allen and Cairney 2015; Cairney et al. 2016) by drawing in literature on political professionalisation (Allen 2012; Cairney 2007; Goplerud 2013) and political elites (Barber 2014; Cowley 2012) in order to identify changes in political careerism.

Career politicians in the literature

Before discussing the existing research on career politicians,[1] it is important to establish what the term means. Following the Weberian distinction between politicians living 'off' and 'for' politics (Weber 1919), King has defined a career

[1] A thorough discussion of the appropriateness of the term 'career politician' goes beyond the scope of this study. It can be found in King 1981.

politician as someone 'committed to politics' (King 1981, p. 2) in the psychological and not financial sense. The characterisation is concerned with a politician's willingness to sacrifice in order to continue to be involved in politics and the enjoyment a politician feels in doing so.

In terms of quantifying the rise of career politician, such a definition is problematic, since 'willingness' and 'commitment' are difficult to measure. This study will characterise career politicians simply as those who centre their professional career around politics. This will allow it to use information on parliamentary careers and to identify traits likely to be found in career politicians. Moreover, this definition allows an important addition to the study of career politicians: by making politics their professional career, non-parliamentary work will also be focused on politics and very little work experience will be gained outside that sphere.[2]

King's article (1981) represents an important contribution, combining in-depth qualitative analysis of biographical and autobiographical accounts of politicians with empirical evidence to show their rise over time. He identifies several aspects of the typical political path of a career politician and establishes important variables for new and retiring MPs as well as cabinet ministers that allow us to empirically identify career politicians. Starting in the 1930s and extending to 1979, King finds that in the 1960s and 1970s MPs retired later, fought more unsuccessful elections before entering parliament for the first time, and usually became MPs in their thirties (King 1981). King's qualitative analysis of the political commitment of individual cabinet ministers produces similar results. While cabinets of the 1930s and 1940s always included some individuals who had barely any interest in politics as a career, cabinets of the 1970s almost exclusively featured highly committed politicians. In order to facilitate comparison over time, the subsequent section of this study will look at the same variables for MPs and cabinet ministers for the time period after 1979.

However, looking at the variables used by King, and following the debate in the literature about career politicians, is unlikely to detect a further increase. The explanation for this is at least threefold: (i) Increased competition within the party decreases the chances of career politicians obtaining a seat at an early age,[3] forces out older politicians and can serve as pre-selection tool for local committees (Samuels 2000).[4] (ii) Seat turnover decided by electoral factors generates large shocks to the data.[5] (iii) Electoral preferences, party structures and personal biographies will set a limit to how young MPs can be at their first election and how long they can stay in

[2] This addition to the profile of career politicians is crucial to the analysis of the rise of career politicians and if confirmed has several far-reaching consequences in terms of their relationship with the public. Or to use Weberian terms: for many politicians living for politics requires them to live off politics.

[3] Michael Dugher for example, a career politician by all accounts, was denied the opportunity to stand for the relatively safe Labour seat of Doncaster North in 2005 when Ed Miliband, another career politician trumped him in getting the Labour nomination. Due to the increased competition—in this case by Miliband—Dugher had to wait until 2010 for his chance.

[4] A recent phenomenon mostly affecting the Labour party.

[5] A Liberal Democrat career politician might have to wait for decades before having a realistic chance at winning a seat.

politics (Lovenduski and Norris, 1994).[6] This is in line with the idea of an 'archetypal candidate' established by Durose et al. (2013) and empirically confirmed for the 2015 election by Lamprinakou et al. (2017) who use the same data set as the first part of this paper. Similarly, Cairney et al. find that parties struggle to produce a distinctive political class (2016). As a consequence, this paper arrives at its first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 The variables introduced by King will not show a further rise in career politicians.

A final reason why the indicators for parliamentary careers stay constant even if there is a rise in career politician is given by Cowley (2012). Being an MP used to be the only way to gain the political experience required to obtain more prestigious offices such as cabinet posts. Thus, career politicians tried very hard to enter parliament as early as possible and thereby accelerate their career. Nowadays career politicians often choose to gain political experience outside parliament but inside the political sphere of Westminster.[7] Today being an advisor or political researcher to an MP or minister may advance a political career faster than being in parliament. Following King's analysis, the topic of career politicians has been picked up by several British commentators whose journalistic works paint a picture of a continued rise in career politicians (Oborne 2008; Ridell 1993; Paxman 2007). These commentators also point to an emerging occupational profile of career politicians. MPs and cabinet members have an increasingly narrow set of pre-parliamentary occupational experiences. Many went straight from university to work in the political sphere in and around Westminster (Goplerud 2013; Oborne 2008; Ridell 1993; Paxman 2007). Recent research has tried to quantify this idea of politics-facilitating occupations (Cairney 2007; Allen 2012; Cairney et al. 2016). Cairney (2007) analyses which professions facilitate political careers since 1945 and points to differences between the parties. Allen (2012) follows the 1997 cohort of new MPs and finds that political experience prior to entering parliament is linked to success within parliament once elected. Looking at data on the occupational background, this paper thus predicts an increase in pre-parliamentary professions appropriate for career politicians, leading to a second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 Occupational data will indicate a further increase in career politicians.

Cowley's aforementioned analysis of career politicians is limited to the party leaders (2012). He finds that the three party leaders at the time, Cameron, Miliband and Clegg, all had a record low parliamentary experience before being elected party leader.[8] Somehow the career path of the three (and their generation in general)[9] seems

[6] For instance, voters might be unwilling to vote for young candidates or selection committees might believe that young candidates are unlikely to win and will thus not adopt them as candidates.

[7] Bryon Criddle (2010) finds that of the new Labour MPs in 2010, about 40% had previous political experience as a minister's aide.

[8] Cameron, Miliband and Clegg were MPs for 4, 5 and 2 years respectively before becoming party leader. The average post-war parliamentary experience of a party leader has been 22 (Conservatives), 19 (Labour) and 16 (Liberal Democrats) (Cowley 2012).

[9] Most of their competition for the leadership posts were also less experienced than the previous average (Cowley 2012).

accelerated, a development Cowley ultimately attributes to the fact that they gain political experience outside of parliament before entering: Miliband as an advisor to Gordon Brown, Cameron as a political researcher and Clegg as an MEP (Cowley 2012). Barber (2014) picks up Cowley's study of current party leaders, confirms that modern party leaders have little professional experience outside of politics, and also points out that political experience was a key ingredient in their success.

These observations of party leaders echo an earlier assessment by Weber, who notes that in the British system cabinet posts have a distinct character. They are 'political officials […] they can be transferred at any time at will, […] they can be dismissed, or at least temporarily withdrawn' (Weber 1919, p. 10). With this remark, Weber hints at both the origin and usefulness of career politicians. In the current system, the emergence of career politicians is not surprising. They survive the harsh political climate and bring the skill set needed to hold office. In contrast to many European countries, cabinet members in Britain do not necessarily need to have special knowledge regarding their ministry, but rather oversee their department and communicate its policies to the public. Furthermore, British Prime Ministers do not have to provide policy leadership, but can confine themselves to 'political management', i.e. the appointment and dismissal of cabinet members and the chairing of cabinet meetings (King 1991, p. 34). These observations suggest that the biggest increase in career politicians will likely be at the top of British politics—in cabinet. Accordingly, this paper will also test the following third and final hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 The further rise in career politicians is most prevalent among cabinet members.

Career politicians in the data

The data presented and analysed on the following pages stem from an original data set compiled by the author and the tables from King's analysis (1981). The new data set contains biographical and parliamentary information on more than 1800 MPs—every MP since 1979. Together, the two sources cover the complete post-war period in the UK and include 18 elections. For each election, the characteristics of new and retiring MPs will be examined. Furthermore, the background of cabinet members will be analysed. The variables analysed in this section are as follows: (i) Age of entry into the House of Commons. (ii) Percentages of MPs and Cabinet Members who contested seats unsuccessfully before their first election to the House of Commons. (iii) Age of retirement from the House of Commons.

The indicators are almost identical to the ones used by King for two reasons: firstly, to facilitate comparison between the data points; secondly, the indicators were chosen by King as the best available surrogates for political commitment, since they are the best approximation to identify politicians centering their career around politics. The age of entry indicates a political career assuming that career politicians try to enter parliament as quickly as possible.[10] Realistically this will be

[10] As of the 1980s, it can safely be assumed that hereditary seats are a thing of the past and thus no longer reflect young entries.

in their early thirties. Similarly an old age of retirement should indicate a career politician, as they would be more likely to hold on to their seat. Having contested seats unsuccessfully prior to entry to parliament shows further commitment to a career in politics.

Data from pre-1945 to 1979 are taken from King (1981) and only include Labour and Conservative politicians. Data from 1983 onwards include all MPs in parliament and were derived using an original data set compiled by the author, based on a research paper published by the House of Commons Information Office (Cracknell et al. 2010). Gaps in the information were filled using the parliament website and Who's Who.[11]

Tables 1 and 2 show the age of entry into parliament of MPs and cabinet ministers, respectively.[12]

Before discussing the data, one has to note that some elections, such as 1979, 1997 and 2010, brought with them a change of power and therefore observe a higher seat turnover than in other elections. This is important since it is likely to change the results as more new MPs enter parliament.[13]

The tables indicate that the new data on the age of entry for both MPs and cabinet ministers do not show a continuation of the trend observed by King, but rather a stabilisation of the percentages. There has not been an increase in the number of career politicians, but there has not been a decrease either. This supports *Hypothesis 1*.

Looking at the percentages from the 1930s to 1979, King found a substantial increase in MPs entering parliament in their 30 s, from only a third between 1935 and 1945 to almost half of all MPs in the 1970s (King 1981). In the last thirty years, this percentage has not increased, but remains, with the exception of the swing elections of 1997 and 2010, over 40%.

The percentage of late entries into parliament, defined as entry after age 50, saw a significant decline between 1935 and 1979—around 20% in the 1930s and 1940s down to just over 10% in 1979. This rate has increased again and is now between 15 and 20% in the last four elections. Figure 1 illustrates the developments in the plus-50 and 30-39 age groups and shows opposing trends.

The data on cabinet ministers show a similar trend. The more recent cabinets featured fewer MPs who entered as 30–39 year olds than the cabinets of the 1970s, but still more than in the 1940s. At the same time, there has been an increase in ministers who entered parliament after the age of 40. They made up about one-fourth of the last three cabinets. This is not to say that those elected at a later age do not qualify as career politicians or lack commitment to politics. Two cabinet ministers of 2010 with the oldest age of entry, Vince Cable and Chris Huhne, are a good example to the contrary. The former fought three unsuccessful elections before being elected in 1997 and the latter was unsuccessful twice before becoming a

[11] For one to three MPs per election it was impossible to determine their exact age. Those cases have been excluded.

[12] The individuals involved served in cabinet at any point during the period indicated in the column headings. Members of the House of Lords who never sat in the House of Commons have been excluded. Members of the House of Lords who once sat in the House of Commons have been included.

[13] Moreover, the election of 2010 is unique in a second aspect, as the expenses scandal lead to a high number of MPs resigning or not standing for re-election. Thus seat turnover in 2010 is even higher.

Table 1 Age of entry of new MPs into the house of commons, in %, by election

First elected age	Pre-1945 (%)	1945 (%)	1950 (%)	1951 (%)	1955 (%)	1959 (%)	1964 (%)	1966 (%)	1970 (%)	Feb. 1974 (%)	Oct. 1974 (%)	1979 (%)	1983 (%)	1987 (%)	1992 (%)	1997 (%)	2001 (%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)
21–29	13.8	4.3	1.2	6.1	5.9	7.5	2.4	8.2	4.5	2.8	13.3	4.7	6.7	0.8	0.0	4.1	1.1	2.5	5.7
30–39	34.7	31.4	37.8	36.7	32.7	32.9	40.2	45.9	42.2	47.2	40.0	55.8	46.7	46.3	38.6	30.9	43.5	43.7	34.8
40–49	33.7	37.8	39.0	38.8	38.6	41.8	40.2	34.1	40.9	38.0	40.0	27.1	38.7	41.3	49.6	44.9	38.0	38.7	35.2
50–59	14.1	17.4	20.1	14.3	21.8	16.4	16.6	5.2	12.3	10.2	6.7	10.9	8.0	9.9	11.0	18.9	16.3	14.3	18.5
60+	3.7	9.0	1.8	4.1	1.0	1.4	0.6	3.5	0.0	1.9	0.0	1.6	0.0	1.7	0.8	1.2	1.1	0.8	5.7
N	326	299	164	47	101	146	169	85	154	108	30	129	150	121	127	243	92	119	227

Table 2 Ages at which Cabinet Ministers first entered the house of commons, in %

First elected age	1935–1945 (%)	1945–1951 (%)	1951–1957 (%)	1957–1964 (%)	1964–1970 (%)	1970–1974 (%)	1974–1979 (%)	1979–1983 (%)
21–29	32.5	6.3	36.0	23.5	11.4	9.1	18.2	9.5
30–34	20.0	15.6	24.0	26.4	37.1	50.0	45.5	47.6
35–39	20.0	34.4	20.0	35.3	34.3	31.8	15.2	42.9
40–44	15.0	28.1	8.0	5.9	8.6	0.0	21.2	0.0
45–49	2.5	6.3	8.0	8.8	2.9	4.6	0.0	0.0
50+	10.0	9.4	4.0	0.0	5.7	4.5	0.0	0.0
N	40	32	25	34	35	22	33	21

First elected age	1983–1987 (%)	1987–1992 (%)	1992–1997 (%)	1997–2001 (%)	2001–2005 (%)	2005–2010 (%)	2010 (%)
21–29	14.3	13.9	16.7	13.8	7.7	7.7	9.7
30–34	35.7	33.3	38.9	41.4	26.9	30.8	22.6
35–39	35.7	30.6	25.0	34.5	34.6	35.9	38.9
40–44	14.3	19.4	16.7	10.3	15.4	12.8	19.4
45–49	0.0	2.8	2.8	0.0	15.4	12.8	0.0
50+	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.7
N	28	36	36	29	26	39	31

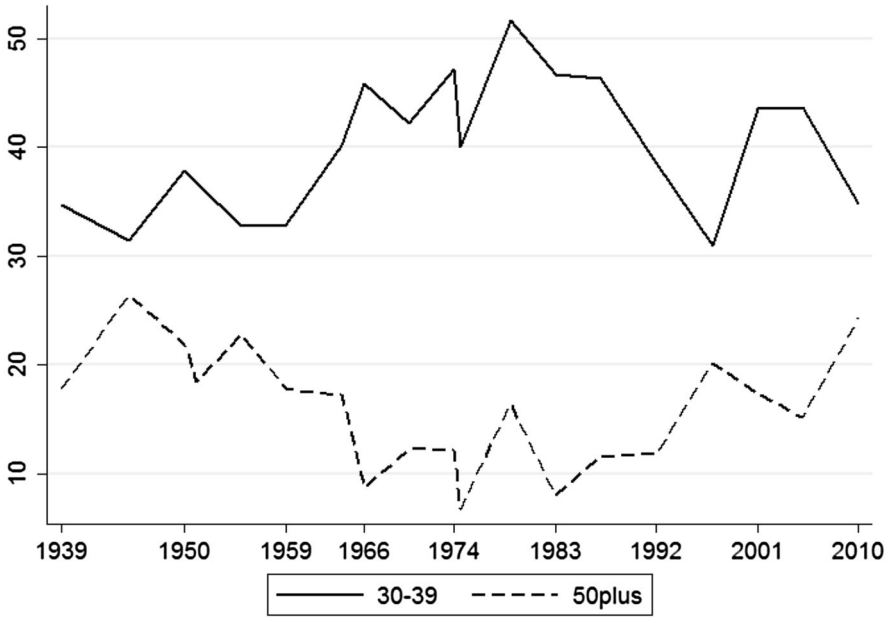

Fig. 1 Age of Entry of New MPs, in %

member of the European parliament and subsequently entering the House in 2005. The conclusion here is twofold. Firstly, the higher percentage of older entrants might be due to factors other than the amount of career politicians. For example, Labour in 1997 and the Conservatives in 2010 came to power after successive disastrous elections; thus future MPs and cabinet ministers had to wait longer before being elected. Secondly, this reiterates a point mentioned earlier, namely that the variables are not a perfect measure of the number of career politicians.

The age of entry for both MPs and cabinet ministers does not indicate a further rise in career politicians during the last three decades, but what about previous elections and retirement age? Tables 3 and 4 show the percentages of MPs and cabinet ministers who contested seats unsuccessfully before their first election to the House of Commons. Table 5 gives the retirement age of MPs who did not stand for re-election.[14]

Again, the data—both on unsuccessful elections and retirement ages—do not indicate an additional shift, but rather that the developments of the 1970s have persisted. This further supports *Hypothesis 1*.

The percentages of MPs that competed (i) no, (ii) 1 and (iii) 2 or more unsuccessful elections before being elected are tracked in Fig. 2. It illustrates a plateau of the trend

[14] Just as in King's study, Table 4 omits one group who should be included and includes another group who should be omitted. On the one hand, it takes no account of MPs who retire between elections, thus forcing by-elections; on the other, it includes some members who have not really retired voluntarily but who have been denied renomination by their constituency party or association and then decided not to seek re-election. It is doubtful, however, whether the inclusion of the former and the exclusion of the latter would have significantly changed the results. Table 5 includes all MPs that left Parliament without standing for re-election.

Table 3 Percentages of MPs who contested one or more elections unsuccessfully before their first election to the house of commons, by election

Previous contests	1945 (%)	1950 (%)	1951 (%)	1955 (%)	1959 (%)	1964 (%)	1966 (%)	1970 (%)	Feb. 1974 (%)	Oct. 1974 (%)	1979 (%)	1983 (%)	1987 (%)	1992(%)	1997 (%)	2001(%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)
Nil	80.1	76.3	73.2	66.6	61	57.6	53.9	49.8	45.3	41.9	41.8	41	42.6	43.6	48.7	50.2	48.3	48.8
1	11.4	16	18.4	19.8	22.8	24.6	26.4	26.9	30.8	32.6	30.6	32.7	34.9	35.2	35.2	35.2	36.2	34.3
2	5.4	5.4	6.2	9.8	12.7	13.4	15.2	16.8	17.4	18.3	20.4	19.6	16.6	16.1	11.5	11.1	11.5	12.5
3+	2.9	1.8	2.3	3.5	3.5	4.3	4.5	6.5	6.5	7.2	7.1	6.78	5.85	5.07	4.55	3.49	4.02	4.5
N	613	612	615	620	623	621	618	620	598	596	607	649	650	651	659	659	646	650

Table 4 Percentages of Cabinet Ministers who contested one or more elections unsuccessfully before their first election to the house of commons, by parliamentary cycle

Previous contests	1935–1945 (%)	1945–1951 (%)	1951–1957 (%)	1957–1964 (%)	1964–1970 (%)	1970–1974 (%)	1974–1979 (%)	1979–1983 (%)
Nil	52.5	48.5	61.5	58.8	62.1	45.5	39.4	38.1
1	27.5	33.3	38.4	35.3	24.3	27.3	36.4	33.3
2	15.0	15.2	0.0	5.9	13.5	22.7	12.1	18.6
3+	5.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.6	12.1	0.0
N	40	32	25	34	35	22	33	21

Previous contests	1983–1987 (%)	1987–1992 (%)	1992–1997 (%)	1997–2001 (%)	2001–2005 (%)	2005–2010 (%)	2010 (%)
Nil	35.7	22.2	27.8	51.7	38.5	56.4	38.7
1	28.6	36.1	44.4	48.3	50.0	28.2	45.2
2	32.1	38.9	27.8	0.0	11.5	15.4	12.9
3+	3.6	2.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.2
N	28	36	36	29	26	39	31

Table 5 Age of retirements from the house of commons, in %, by election

Members retiring at the age of	1951 (%)	1955 (%)	1959 (%)	1964 (%)	1966 (%)	1970 (%)	Feb. 1974 (%)	Oct. 1974 (%)	1979 (%)	1983 (%)	1987 (%)	1992 (%)	1997 (%)	2001 (%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)
60+	37.9	51.4	63.5	72.9	78.4	74.4	71	49.9	72.9	63.8	81.3	84.3	70.3	68.9	60	68
50–59	24.1	35.1	19.1	11.9	16.2	14.1	20.1	35.7	18.6	31.9	10.4	9.8	24.3	22.2	37.8	25.3
49 or less	37.9	13.5	17.5	15.3	5.4	11.5	8.7	21.4	8.5	4.3	8.3	5.9	5.4	8.9	2.2	6.7
N	29	37	62	59	37	78	69	14	59	47	48	51	74	45	45	75

after the 1970s. King observed an enormous shift in terms of national electoral experience of MPs. The percentage of MPs who had not unsuccessfully competed before entering parliament went from around 75% in 1945 and the early 1950s to around 40% in the late 1970s. MPs with two or more attempts went from less than 10% to more than a quarter of all MPs in the same period (King 1981). In recent years, the percentage of MPs without previous electoral experience on a national level increased slightly but is still below 50%. MPs with two or more attempts are a lower proportion, but again well above the levels of the 1950s. In terms of cabinet ministers, the percentages fluctuate. However, as with the previous tables, it seems that the last 10 years are similar to the 1970s and above the levels of the 1950s.

The data on retirement age further strengthen the first hypothesis. During the 1950s and 1960s, the retirement age (shown in Fig. 3) increased steadily,[15] and reached its highest mark in 1992 when more than 80% of MPs retired after turning 60. It has since then decreased slightly and is now around 70%, similar to the 1970s. The percentage of MPs retiring younger than 50 has further decreased and has not exceeded 9% in the last 30 years.[16]

It becomes clear that there has not been a further development in the last 30 years in terms of the variables analysed. A typical political career seems to have remained more or less unchanged in the last three decades. Almost half of all MPs and two-thirds of cabinet ministers enter parliament in their thirties and most others do so in their 40 s. More than half of all MPs and cabinet ministers have contested elections unsuccessfully before entering parliament and the vast majority retire after turning 60. All the variables are substantially higher than they were in the 1940s and 1950s—the first time periods analysed by King—but they have barely increased in the last 30 years and some have even declined slightly. This development is in line with the arguments in the previous section and confirms the first hypothesis made.

Career politicians in the workforce

The theory presented about career politicians implies a certain professionalisation of a politician's career. The commitment to politics, the desire to prove oneself and the need for experience in the political sphere all require a focus on the life around Westminster. The jobs a career politician will seek are likely to be closely related to or directly involved in the world of politics: researcher in a think tank, aide or adviser to a minister or MP, political journalist or commentator. These occupations fit best into the Weberian category of the communicator.

Extending Weber's categories and looking at the last 60 years, this paper identifies several professional backgrounds: (1) the Westminster group: political researcher, journalist, lobbyist; (2) legal professions: barrister, solicitor; (3) business-related

[15] Only 14 MPs stood down at the October election of 1974. The data from this election thus have to be treated with caution.

[16] As it was with the entry age, the average retirement age has not been included as it is only available since 1983.

Table 6 Percentages of MPs by Previous Occupations, by Election

	1951 (%)	1955 (%)	1959 (%)	1964 (%)	1966 (%)	1970 (%)	Feb. 1974 (%)	Oct. 1974 (%)	1979 (%)	1983 (%)	1987 (%)	1992 (%)	1997 (%)	2001 (%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)
Westminster Group	**10.4**	**11.3**	**11.0**	**10.3**	**9.2**	**12.7**	**11.3**	**10.2**	**10.8**	**10.3**	**12.1**	**14.4**	**17.0**	**18.4**	**21.1**	**20.6**
Politician/Pol Organiser	2.9	3.9	2.9	2.9	1.9	3.4	2.1	2.0	3.4	3.2	5.4	7.3	9.5	10.5	14.1	14.5
Publisher/Journalist	7.5	7.4	8.1	7.5	7.3	9.3	9.2	8.2	7.4	7.2	6.7	7.0	7.5	7.9	7.0	6.1
Legal Professions	**18.2**	**18.2**	**20.3**	**20.5**	**20.2**	**20.1**	**19.0**	**18.4**	**15.5**	**16.5**	**14.0**	**13.2**	**10.2**	**10.8**	**11.7**	**13.8**
Barrister	14.4	15.0	16.4	15.9	15.0	15.6	15.2	14.8	10.8	11.0	9.1	8.5	5.7	5.2	5.5	6.1
Solicitor	3.7	3.2	4.0	4.6	5.3	4.5	3.8	3.6	4.7	5.6	4.9	4.8	4.5	5.6	6.2	7.7
Business related	**23.5**	**21.7**	**22.3**	**18.4**	**17.5**	**20.7**	**20.6**	**19.7**	**22.3**	**25.8**	**25.6**	**24.2**	**18.0**	**17.0**	**19.2**	**25.1**
Civil Service/Local Govt	**2.9**	**3.4**	**3.5**	**4.0**	**3.5**	**2.4**	**2.1**	**2.3**	**4.8**	**4.3**	**3.5**	**4.1**	**5.9**	**5.6**	**6.2**	**2.9**
Lecturer or Teacher	**7.6**	**6.9**	**6.5**	**9.1**	**12.3**	**10.6**	**12.6**	**15.1**	**12.4**	**11.9**	**13.4**	**16.3**	**20.0**	**18.6**	**14.8**	**7.9**
Teachers: Uni./College	4.5	2.6	3.0	3.5	6.4	4.2	5.2	7.2	4.5	5.1	5.7	7.2	9.7	8.4	7.2	4.0
Teacher: School	3.1	4.3	3.5	5.6	5.9	6.4	7.4	7.9	7.9	6.8	7.6	9.1	10.3	10.2	7.6	3.9
Other	**37.3**	**38.5**	**36.4**	**37.7**	**37.3**	**33.5**	**34.5**	**34.3**	**34.2**	**31.2**	**31.5**	**27.8**	**28.9**	**29.7**	**27.0**	**29.6**
Doctor	2.1	1.6	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.1	1.5	1.3	1.3	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.4	1.3	1.0	1.4
Armed Service	5.5	8.1	6.4	4.8	3.5	3.9	1.5	1.3	3.2	3.0	2.5	2.4	1.6	1.9	2.3	2.6
White Collar	2.6	1.4	1.6	2.7	4.6	0.6	1.1	1.6	1.5	3.3	4.3	7.3	11.4	12.1	12.7	13.5
Farmer	2.8	5.8	6.5	6.0	4.6	5.1	4.4	3.9	3.7	3.3	3.0	1.9	1.1	1.0	1.3	1.6
Manual Workers	17.7	15.8	14.5	16.7	17.7	12.5	14.7	14.9	15.8	11.8	11.6	10.0	8.9	8.4	6.2	4.0
Total (*N*)	616	621	629	629	628	623	612	609	620	629	629	627	629	630	615	621

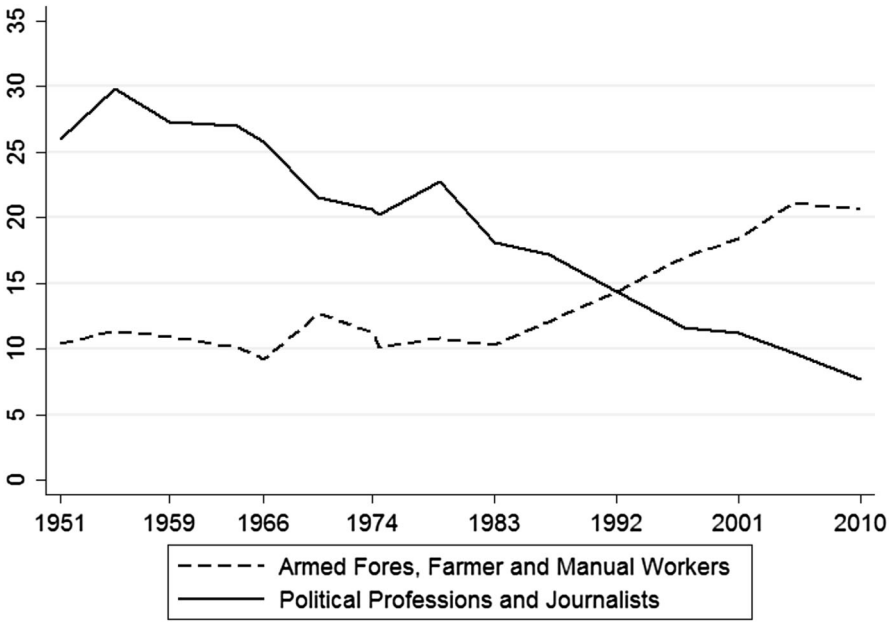

Fig. 2 Number of unsuccessful elections of MPs, in %

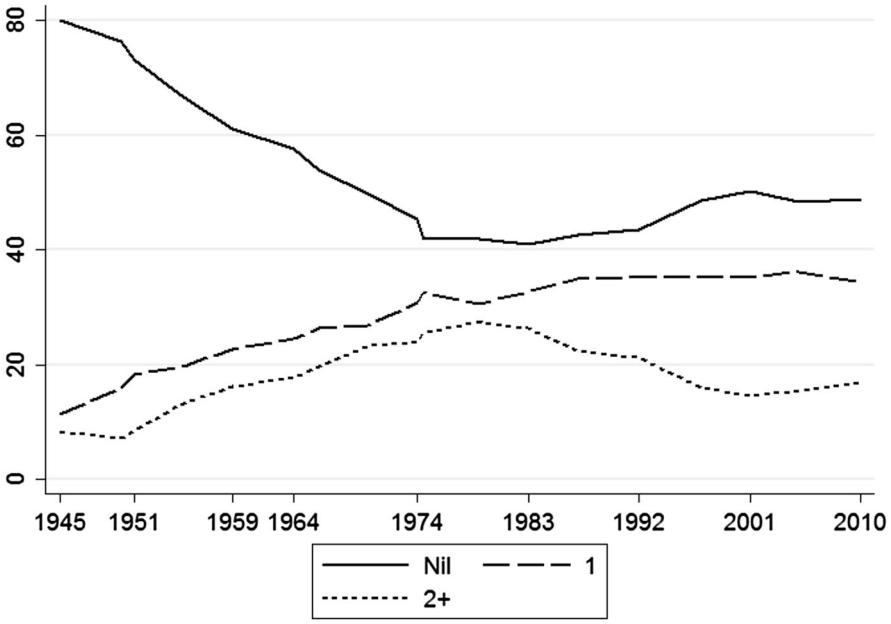

Fig. 3 Retirement age of MPs, in %

professions[17]; (4) civil service or local government; (5) lecturer or teacher; (6) union official; (7) other (armed forces, manual workers, farmer/land owner).[18]

The data on the occupational background of MPs since 1955 show an increase in career politicians in line with *Hypothesis 2* (Table 6). The share of MPs with political jobs has increased substantially. Since the 1950s, politicians and political organisers increased fivefold from around 3–15%. Most of this surge has occurred during the last three decades. As a result, this political background together with journalism now represents more than a fourth of all MPs, up from 10% during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Lecturers and teachers, another group with the Weberian 'communicators' label, are also on the rise. If this group is extended to include all people whose professions require public communication either written or spoken (i.e. lawyers and lecturers/teachers) the results remain strong: they now comprise almost half of all MPs, up from 35% in the 1950s.

On the other hand, jobs such as armed forces, farmers and manual workers used to represent a prominent pool for party recruits (armed forces and farmers for the Conservatives and manual workers for Labour) but all have been in steady decline. While making up over 25% of MPs during the 1950s and around 10% in the 1970s, they have now dropped further to no more than 7.5% of all MPs (see Fig. 4). In contrast to the communicators, these are jobs that have little to do with the practice of politics, but much with its policies. A shift in these occupational backgrounds is therefore likely to change both the style and content of politics.

Some of the change might be attributed to New Labour's move towards the centre. They are not only catering to but also recruiting from a less working-class and more white-collar clientele.[19] Yet, other parts of the development can certainly be credited to the rise of career politicians. This analysis of occupational backgrounds deserves a closer look. In particular, the background of cabinet ministers is worth examining due to their important role for policy setting. The analysis now uses biographical and autobiographical sources to place each cabinet minister of the last 8 legislative periods (spanning 34 years) in one of the 7 categories identified previously: (1) political professions and journalists,[20] (2) legal professions, (3) business-related professions, (4) civil service or local government, (5) lecturer or teacher, (6) union official, (7) other.

[17] Business-related professions refer to occupations such as business management, consultants, accountants or financial analysts. Of course there can be considerable overlap with other categories, especially with the legal professions. Individuals were placed into the legal professions category if they have been called to the bar at one point.

[18] The table was created by collecting data from the various editions of 'The British general election of …' since 1951 (the first time the data were included in the publication). The category 'union officials' is omitted from the table, since the percentages could not be found in the data. It is likely to be part of the miscellaneous sub-category 'white collar'.

[19] A detailed analysis of the rise of New Labour and its impact on class voting and representation can be found in (Heath et al. 2001).

[20] One might argue for splitting the two up in separate categories. There is, however, considerable overlap and crossover between them, which often makes it difficult to label individuals as one and not the other. Furthermore, for the purpose of this analysis both produce occupational backgrounds heavily intertwined with Westminster and are thus ideal for career politicians.

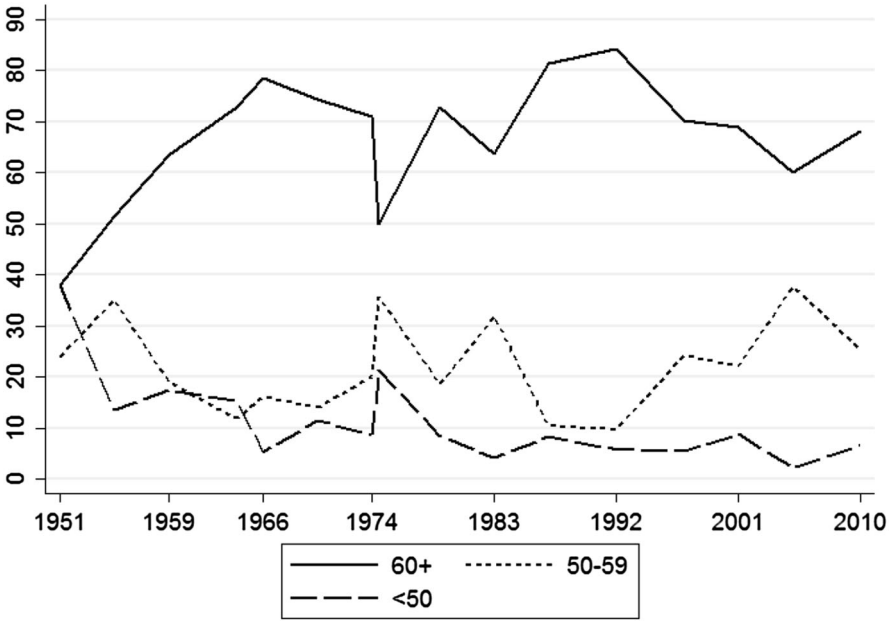

Fig. 4 Previous occupation of MPs, in %

Tables 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 in the Appendix groups the cabinet ministers of each parliamentary cycle from 1979 to 2015 according to their professional backgrounds.[21] Figure 5 visualises the data by tracking the percentage of cabinet ministers with various occupational backgrounds over time.[22]

A look at the figure and the tables reveals a sharp increase in cabinet ministers whose previous professions are in the political sphere. *Hypothesis 3* is correct in asserting that career politicians are especially prevalent in the cabinets. The two Thatcher ministries of 1979 and 1983 had only 6 and 4 such members out of 31 and 33, respectively. The last Blair/Brown ministry has 13 out of 44 cabinet ministers with a background in journalism or political research, while in the Cameron ministry they represent 10 out of 31. Figure 5 shows how their percentage increased from less then 20% in 1979 (and less than 15% in 1983) to almost 40% in the last two cabinets.

At the same time, there is a sharp decline in the number of cabinet ministers with a legal profession as their previous occupation. Under Thatcher, they made up a third of the cabinet, but in the Cameron ministry, there are only 15% with such qualifications. The percentages of cabinet ministers with various occupational backgrounds are shown in Fig. 5.

Similarly, professional backgrounds included in the 'Other' group have increasingly become the exception. While the first two cabinets in this study still

[21] The information for these tables was taken from Who's Who and Who Was Who. Those occupying the four top offices in the state—Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary—have been underlined and place at the top of their columns.

[22] Here groups (4)–(6) are combined as 'white collar'.

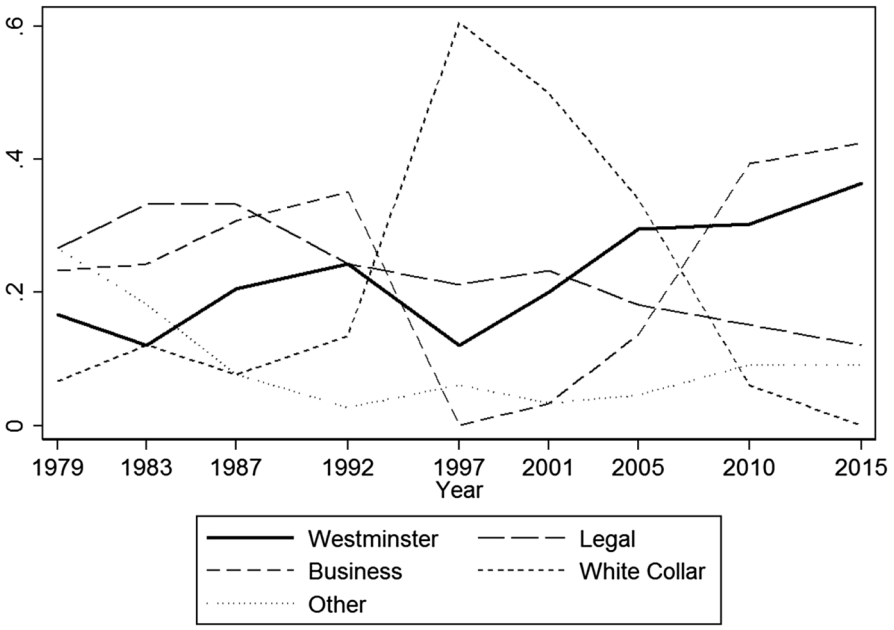

Fig. 5 Occupational backgrounds in Cabinet, in %

have 9 and 6 members (mostly former armed forces) in this category, recent cabinets have not had more than 2 of this sort. The study of cabinet ministers seems to support the findings on the occupational backgrounds of MPs, indicating a rise in the number of career politicians. It also suggests that this development is more pronounced among cabinet members than elsewhere in politics.

Some of the variation among professional groups can be explained through changes in power. For example, the current Conservative government is made up of many politicians with business backgrounds. The same could be said about former union officials in previous Labour cabinets.

Yet, overall there has been an increase in the number of cabinet ministers with a background in politics and at the same type a sharp decline in the traditional legal background of politicians. Moreover, professional backgrounds which have little to do with day-to-day politics have become a very rare occurrence in recent cabinets. This recent development is further illustrated when looking at the leadership of both the government and the opposition at the time of the general election in 2015: the three most prominent figures in both the government (David Cameron, George Osborne and Nick Clegg) and the opposition (Ed Miliband, Ed Balls and David Miliband) all fell into the first category and can be classified as career politicians.[23] In contrast, until 2005, Nigel Lawson and Charles Clarke were the only cabinet ministers with a professional background in politics who occupied one of the four top offices in the

[23] Recent changes in leadership have altered the situation somewhat. Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn both have distinct profiles from Cameron and Miliband.

government. Thus, a new generation of political leaders has emerged with their sole professional background in and around Whitehall, confirming *Hypothesis 3*.

Conclusion

This article makes several points about the profile of politicians, their typical political path and the prevalence of career politicians. Firstly, it was argued that analyses using variables like 'age of entry', 'number of unsuccessful attempts to enter Parliament' and 'age of retirement' will not indicate a further rise in career politicians, because a plateau has been reached. A further decrease in, for example, the age of entry is unlikely to happen due to competition among career politicians, seat turnover as well as electoral limits on how young MPs can become. Secondly, it was asserted that a further rise in career politicians will be confirmed by looking at occupational data following the literature on the professionalisation of politics. Thirdly, focusing on political elites, this paper claimed that this development will be more prevalent among cabinet members.

The analysis of a new and original data set has confirmed the first two hypotheses. An in-depth qualitative look at biographical data on cabinet members has confirmed the third. The original variables remain at an increased level since the 1970s. The data for occupational background show a clear shift towards more career politicians with a robust increase in politics-related professions and a majority of communications-based occupations. This trend is even more pronounced in the different cabinets.

There is an argument to be made that the nature of the British political system and the specific character of cabinet posts welcomes this increase, insofar as ministers do not need to bring professional skills, but rather organisational and communication skills to the post. However, due to the immense sway, they enjoy in the policy-setting process, some commentators express dismay when neither the prime minister nor the chancellor or the deputy prime minister has held a job outside the political sphere. There may be an adverse selection effect: the competition and structure of elections and parties require a very early and strong commitment to politics, if one hopes to become an MP. On the other hand, this early commitment prevents future politicians from acquiring any professional experience outside the political sphere, which would be useful in office.

At a time when the political class and political careerism, in particular, seem increasingly unpopular, future research should investigate whether political professionalisation changes politician's behaviour and how voters react to different political backgrounds.

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Appendix

See Tables 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15.

Table 7 Cabinet members by previous occupation 1979–1983

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Norman Fowler	Margaret Thatcher	John Biffen	Arthur Cockfield	Norman St John-Stevas		Peter Carrington (armed forces)
David Howell	Geoffrey Howe	Nicholas Edwards				William Whitelaw (armed forces)
Nigel Lawson	Leon Brittan	Michael Heseltine				Humphrey Atkins (armed forces)
Angus Maude	Mark Carlisle	Tom King				Francis Pym (armed forces and farmer)
Janet Young	Ian Gilmour	John Nott				James Prior (farmer)
	Quintin Hogg	Cecil Parkinson				Norman Tebbit (pilot)
	Patrick Jenkin	Peter Walker				Lord Soames (armed forces)
	Keith Joseph					George Younger (armed forces)
5	8	7	1	1	0	8
N (30)						

Table 8 Cabinet members by previous occupation 1983–1987

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Nigel Lawson	Margaret Thatcher	John Biffen	Arthur Cockfield	Grey Ruthven		Michael Jopling (farmer)
Paul Channon	Leon Brittan	Nicholas Edwards	Douglas Hurd			James Prior (farmer)
Norman Fowler	Geoffrey Howe	Michael Heseltine				Nicholas Ridley(armed forces)
John MacGregor	Kenneth Baker	Tom King				Norman Tebbit (pilot)
	Kenneth Clarke	John Moore				William Whitelaw (armed forces)
	Quintin Hogg	Cecil Parkinson				George Younger (armed forces)
	Patrick Jenkin	John Wakeham				
	Sir Keith Joseph	Peter Walker				
	Peter Rees					
	Malcolm Rifkind					
	David Young					
4	11	8	2 2		0	6
N (33)						

Table 9 Cabinet members by previous occupation 1987–1992

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Nigel Lawson	Margaret Thatcher	Norman Lamont	Douglas Hurd	Lord Belstead		Nicholas Ridley (armed forces)
Paul Channon	Kenneth Baker	John Major		William Waldegrave		William Whitelaw (armed forces)
Norman Fowler	Kenneth Clarke	Peter Brooke				George Younger (armed forces)
John Gummer	Michael Havers	Michael Heseltine				
John MacGregor	Malcolm Rifkind	Tom King				
Tony Newton	Michael Howard	Ian Lang				
Chris Patten	Geoffery Howe	Peter Lilley				
Richard Ryder	David Hunt	John Moore				
	James Mackay	Cecil Parkinson				
	Patrick Mayhew	Tim Renton				
	David Mellor	John Wakeham				
	David Waddington	Peter Walker				
	David Young					
8	13	12	1	2	0	3
N (39)						

Table 10 Cabinet members by previous occupation 1992–1997

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Jonathan Aitken	Kenneth Clarke	John Major	Douglas Hurd	Brian Mawhinney		Virginia Bottomley
Stephen Dorrell	Michael Howard	Norman Lamont		John Patten		(scientist)
Michael Forsyth	Malcolm Rifkind	Peter Brooke		Gillian Shepherd		
Norman Fowler	Alistair Goodlad	Roger Freeman		William Waldegrave		
John Gummer	Douglas Hogg	Robert Gascoyne-Cecil				
John MacGregor	David Hunt	William Hague				
Tony Newton	Donald Mackay	Jeremy Hanley				
Michael Portillo	Patrick Mayhew	Michael Heseltine				
Richard Ryder	David Mellor	Ian Lang				
		Peter Lilley				
		John Redwood				
		John Wakeham				
		George Young				
9	9	13	1	4	0	1
N(37)						

Table 11 Cabinet members by previous occupation 1997–2001

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Margaret Jay	Tony Blair		Alistair Darling	Gordon Brown	Nick Brown	Margaret Beckett
Helen Liddell	Jack Straw		Frank Dobson	Robin Cook	Jack Cunningham	Gavin Strang (scientist)
John Reid	Donald Dewar		Alun Michael	David Blunkett	Peter Mandelson	
Andrew Smith	Harriet Harman		Paul Murphy	Stephen Byers	Alan Milburn	
	Geoff Hoon		Clare Short	David G. Clark	John Prescott	
	Derry Irvine		Chris Smith	Ron Davies	George Robertson	
	Ivor Richard			Mo Mowlam		
				Ann Taylor		
4	7	0	6	8	6	2
N(33)						

Table 12 Cabinet members by previous occupation 2001–2005

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Charles Clarke	Tony Blair	Ruth Kelly	Valerie Amos	Gordon Brown	Hilary Benn	Margaret Beckett
Patricia Hewitt	Jack Straw		Alistair Darling	David Blunkett	Peter Hain	
Helen Liddell	Paul Boateng		Tessa Jowell	Stephen Byers	Alan Johnson	
Ian McCartney	Charles Falconer		Paul Murphy	Robin Cook	Alan Milburn	
John Reid	Geoff Hoon		Clare Short	Estelle Morris	John Prescott	
Andrew Smith	Derry Irvine					
	Gareth Williams					
6	7	1	5	5	5	1
N(30)						

Table 13 Cabinet members by previous occupation 2005–2010

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
Charles Clarke	Tony Blair	Catherine Ashton	Alistair Darling	Gordon Brown	Hilary Benn	Margaret Beckett
John Reid	Jack Straw	Liam Byrne	Valerie Amos	Jacqui Smith	John Denham	Bob Ainsworth (man. worker)
David Miliband	Douglas Alexander	Yvette Cooper	Hilary Armstrong	David Blunkett	Peter Hain	
Andrew Adonis	Des Browne	Ruth Kelly	Tessa Jowell	John Hutton	Alan Johnson	
Ed Balls	Hazel Blears	Jim Murphy	Paul Murphy		Peter Mandelson	
Ben Bradshaw	Charles Falconer	Stephen Timms			John Prescott	
Andy Burnham	Harriet Harman					
Patricia Hewitt	Geoff Hoon					
Ian McCartney						
Ed Miliband						
James Purnell						
Janet Royall						
Shaun Woodward						
13	8	6	5	4	6	2
N(44)						

Table 14 Cabinet members by previous occupation 2010–2015

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
David Cameron	Alistair Carmichael	*William Hague*	Andrew Lansley			Dr Liam Fox (doctor)
George Osborne	Kenneth Clarke	*Theresa May*	Eric Pickles			Iain Duncan Smith (armed forces)
Danny Alexander	David Jones	Vince Cable				Patrick McLoughlin (miner)
Nick Clegg	Theresa Villiers	Edward Davey				
Michael Gove	Sayeeda Warsi	Thomas Galbraith				
Chris Grayling		Cheryl Gillan				
Jonathan Hill		Justine Greening				
Chris Huhne		Phillip Hammond				
Michael Moore		Jeremy Hunt				
Caroline Spelman		Sajid Javid				
		David Lawson				
		Andrew Mitchell				
		Owen Paterson				
10	5	13	2			3
N(33)						

Table 15 Cabinet members by previous occupation 2015–

Political researcher, Journalist, lobbyist	Legal Professions	Business Professions	Civil service or Local govt	Lecturer, Teacher	Union Official	Other
David Cameron	David Mundell	*Theresa May*				Dr Liam Fox (doctor)
George Osborne	James Brokenshire	*Phillip Hammond*				Iain Duncan Smith (armed forces)
Boris Johnson	Nicky Morgan	Alun Cairns				Patrick McLoughlin (miner)
Chris Grayling	Theresa Villiers	Amber Rudd				
Damian Green		Andrea Leadson				
John Whittingdale		David Davis				
Michael Gove		Dr David Lidington				
Natalie Evans		Elizabeth Truss				
Oliver Letwin		Greg Clark				
Priti Patel		Jeremy Hunt				
Stephen Crabb		Justine Greening				
Tina Stowell		Karen Bradley				
		Michael Fallon				
		Sajid Javid				
12	4	14				3
N(33)						

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