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Who, and where, are the Conservative party's members?

Most voted to leave the EU but stability will also be a factor in leadership contest

By Andrew Bounds

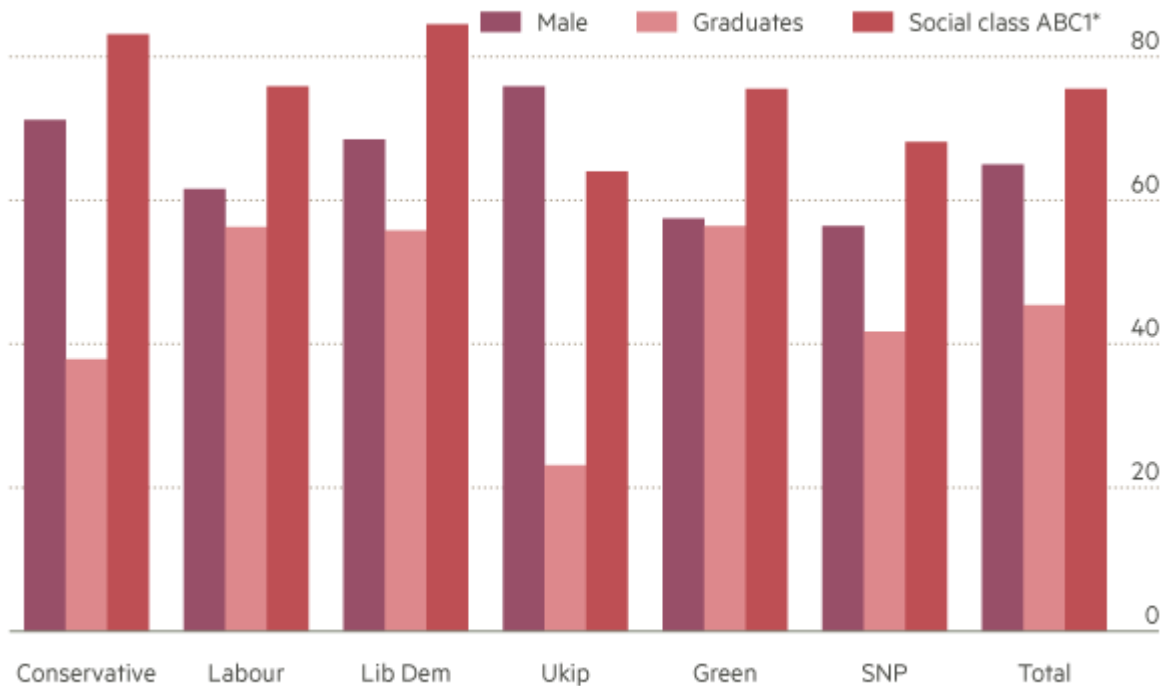
The typical member of the Conservative party is older, richer and more likely to live in the south than the population as a whole, and most voted to leave the EU. But no one is sure exactly how many of them there are.

Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London, has studied Tory party members for several years but even he does not know how many members the party has — and therefore how many people will be eligible to select the next prime minister. His best estimate is 130,000-150,000. Some records are kept by constituency parties, some by Conservative Central Office, so there are gaps in the data.

“We know more than three-quarters are middle or upper class, ABC1 in social status,” said Prof Bale. “Seven out of 10 are men and more than half are over 60.” About 60 per cent live in the south. “They are where the Tory vote is concentrated,” he said.

Characteristics of British political party members

Survey of 5,696 party members, May 2015 (%)



* Calculated on head of household income.

Sources: Tim Bale; YouGov; ESRC

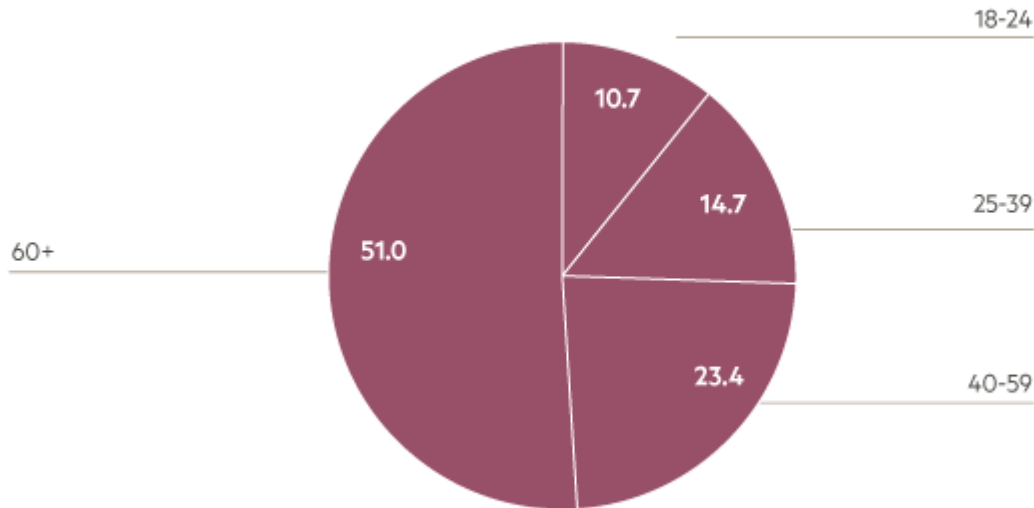
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Although the majority voted for Britain to come out of the EU, that does not mean they will back Andrea Leadsom, who campaigned to leave the bloc, while Theresa May, the longstanding home secretary and her rival for the leadership, was a quiet Remainer. “[Tory members] prize stability and Leadsom is leading an insurgent campaign against the views of most MPs,” he said.

According to Prof Bale, Conservative members cast their votes based on three factors: the ability to unite the party, proven leadership skills and the ability to win an election.

Conservative members by age ...

Survey of 1,193 Conservative party members, May 2015



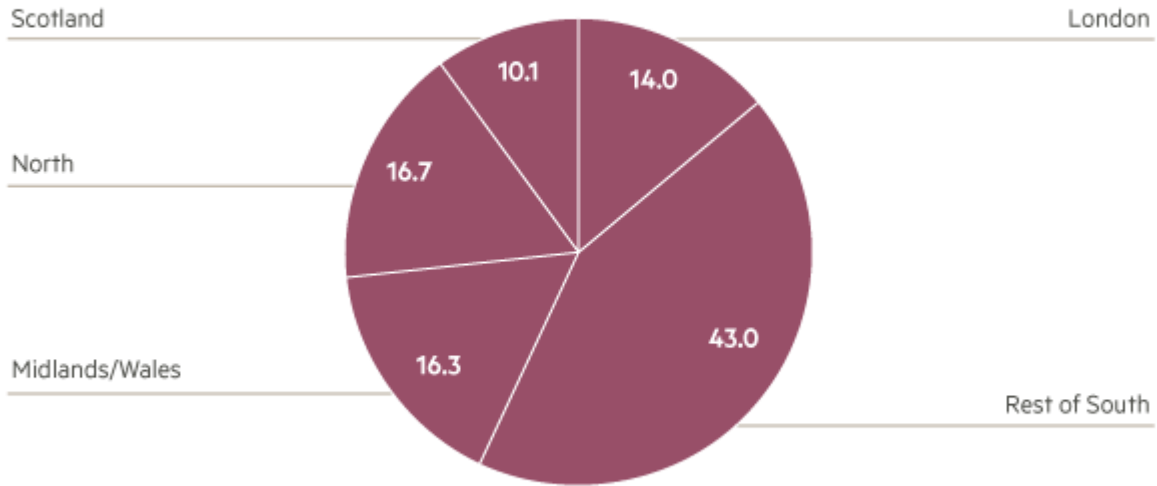
Sources: Tim Bale; YouGov; ESRC

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On all three, he said, Mrs May would be ahead: “Theresa May should win. Our survey after the general election found that most were waiting to see what deal David Cameron got before deciding on the EU. They [Tory members] are not headbanging Eurosceptics.

He also said Conservative MPs had considerable influence in local parties. While Labour constituencies often have only a handful of party members, the Tories are concentrated in their heartlands. “The MPs are also more similar to the membership [than their Labour counterparts],” Prof Bale added, though the membership was slightly more socially conservative than the Westminster party, he said.

... and by region



Sources: Tim Bale; YouGov; ESRC

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Although Boris Johnson, whose leadership bid was torpedoed by his erstwhile ally Michael Gove, remained popular, he would not swing many votes behind Mrs Leadsom after backing her. “I don’t think Boris has got much fairy dust left to sprinkle,” said Prof Bale.