

Candidate Selection: a view from the grassroots

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Representative Audit of Britain Workshop

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Social and political characteristics of British political party members, 2015.

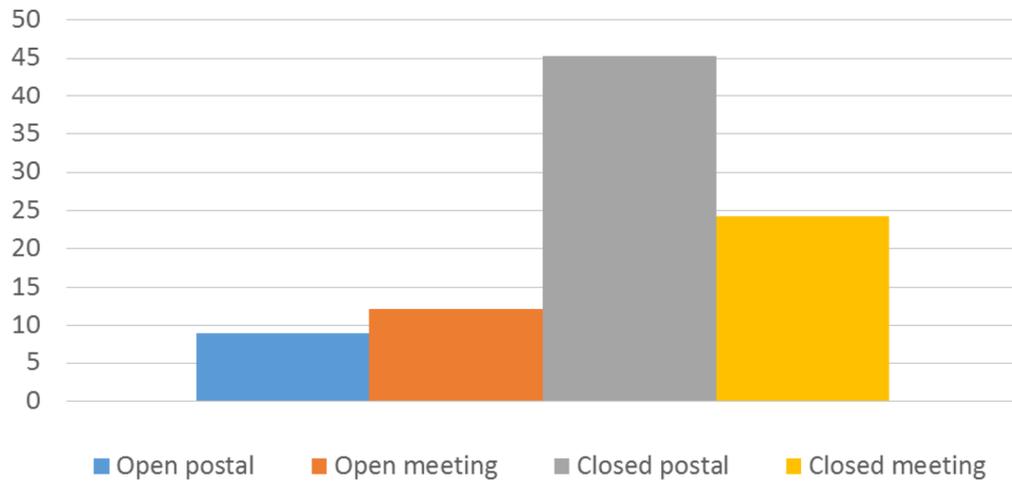
Attribute	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	SNP	Total
Mean age	54	51	51	58	42	49	51
% male	71.2	61.6	68.5	75.9	57.5	56.4	65.0
% graduates	37.9	56.3	55.8	23.1	56.4	41.7	45.4
% ABC1 (HH)	83.1	75.9	84.5	64.0	75.5	68.1	75.5
% ABC1 (personal)	74.6	69.7	76.0	59.9	65.2	61.9	68.2
Mean left-right*	7.76	2.39	4.1	7.34	1.9	2.96	4.44
N	1193	1180	730	785	845	963	5696

First we'll look at how they prefer to select candidates

Then we'll look at what sort of MPs
members of different parties want to
see more or less of

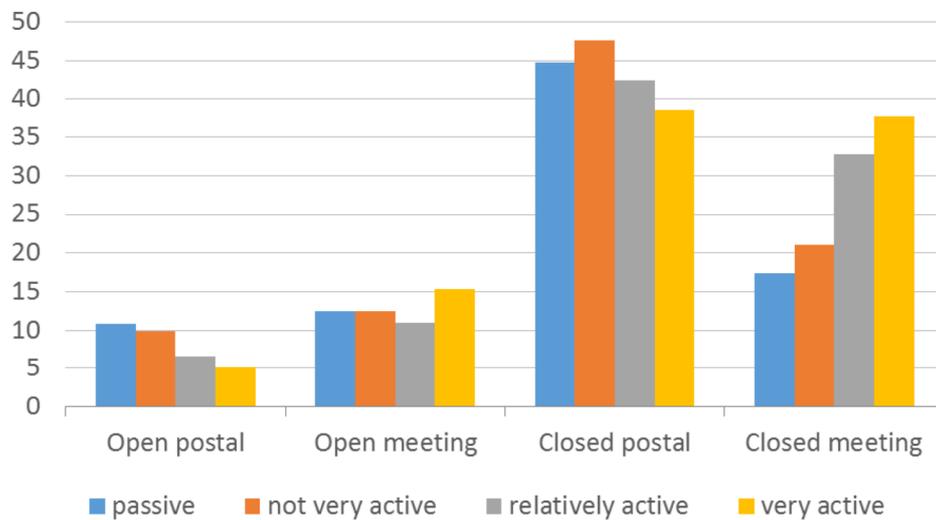
Taking UK party members as
a whole....

Preferred method of selection



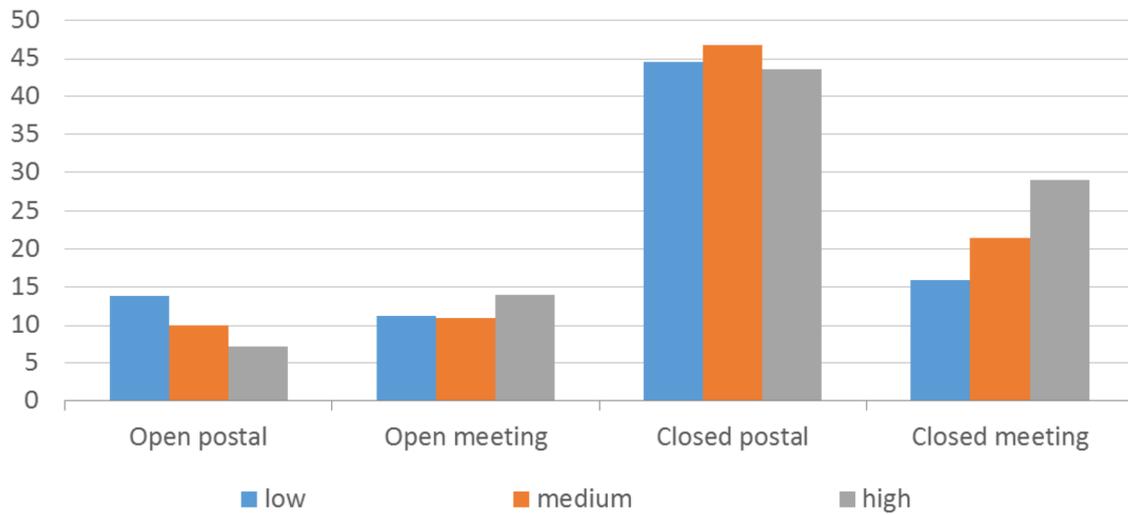
We presented party members with four basic options. Guess which one proved the most popular? Yes: the one that maximized their influence and minimized their effort – closed postal ballots. Support for the more permissive options wasn't negligible but it wasn't particularly impressive.

Method of selection and campaign activity



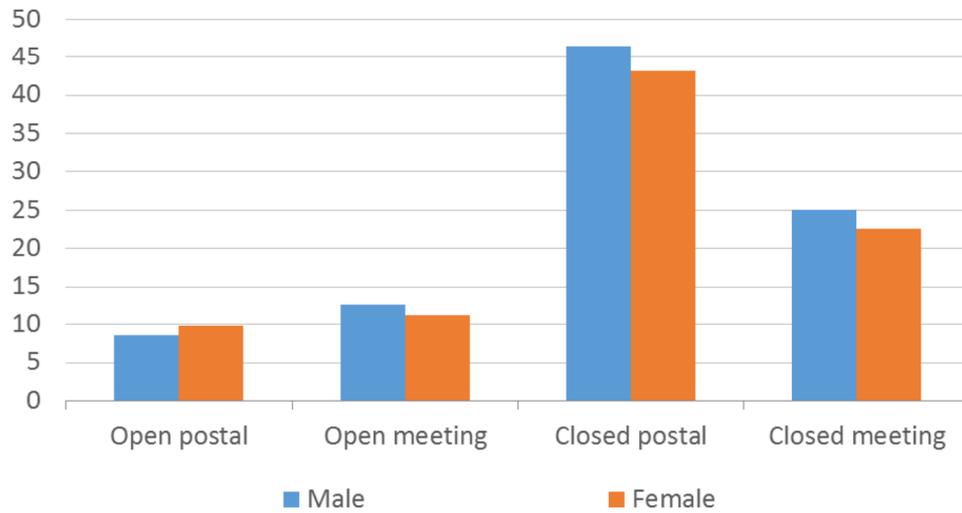
So then we can ask ourselves a series of questions. Perhaps the most obvious is whether more active members are more likely than less active members to prefer closed rather than open methods of selecting candidates? Not entirely surprisingly – and remember in this presentation we’re only eyeballing the data – it looks, as one might expect, that (relatively speaking) those most involved with their parties prefer a closed method are considerably keener than those who aren’t so active on making that the decision in a meeting; the less active are a little keener on doing the whole thing by post.

Method of selection and personal efficacy

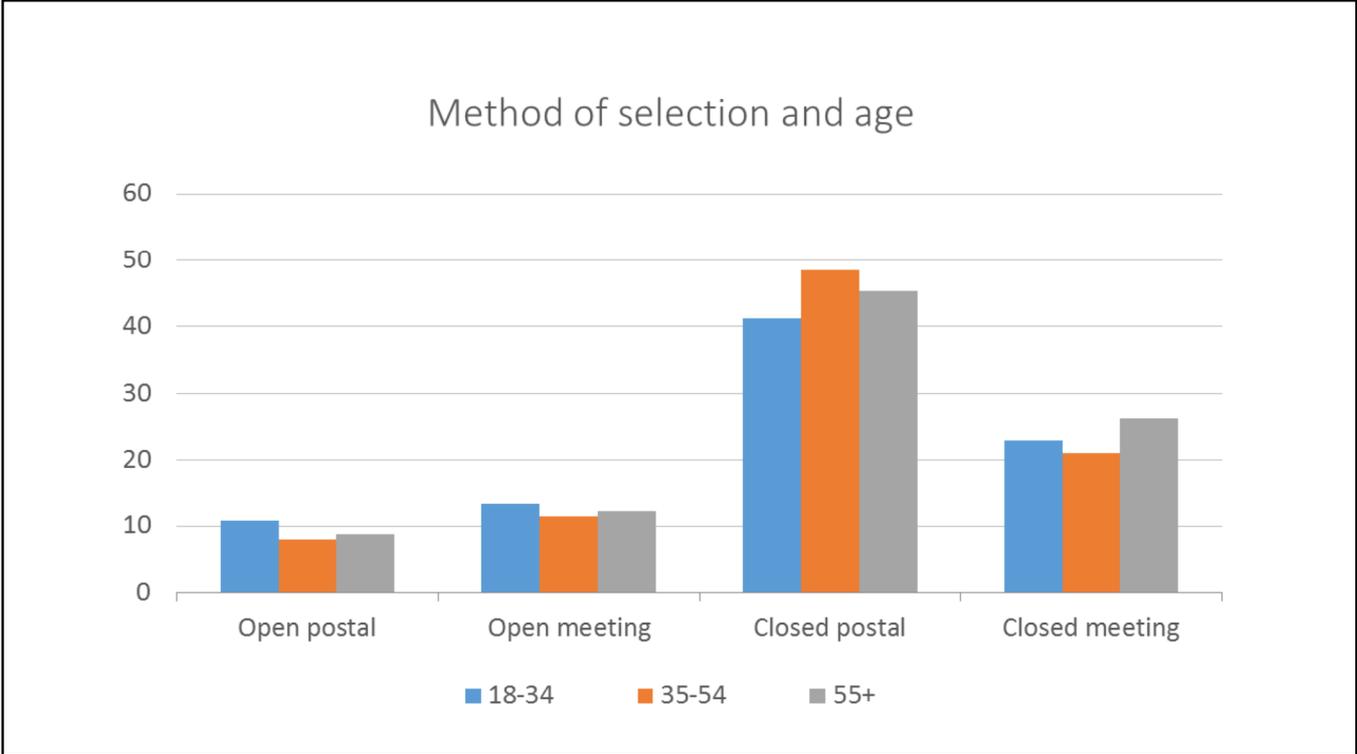


Pretty much the same goes for efficacy: those who feel they make a difference are more inclined than those who don't to select candidates in a meeting. But it's all relative – the most popular option is still the one that maximizes influence while minimizing effort.

Method of selection and gender

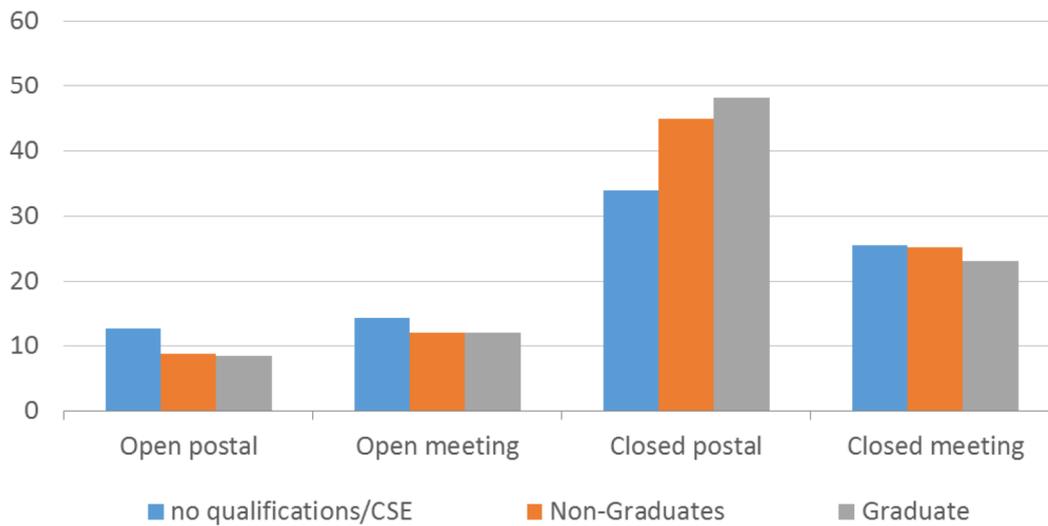


When it comes to the demographics, there's not a huge difference when it comes to gender really: female party members seem slightly less keen on the closed methods than their male counterparts but there's not much in it.



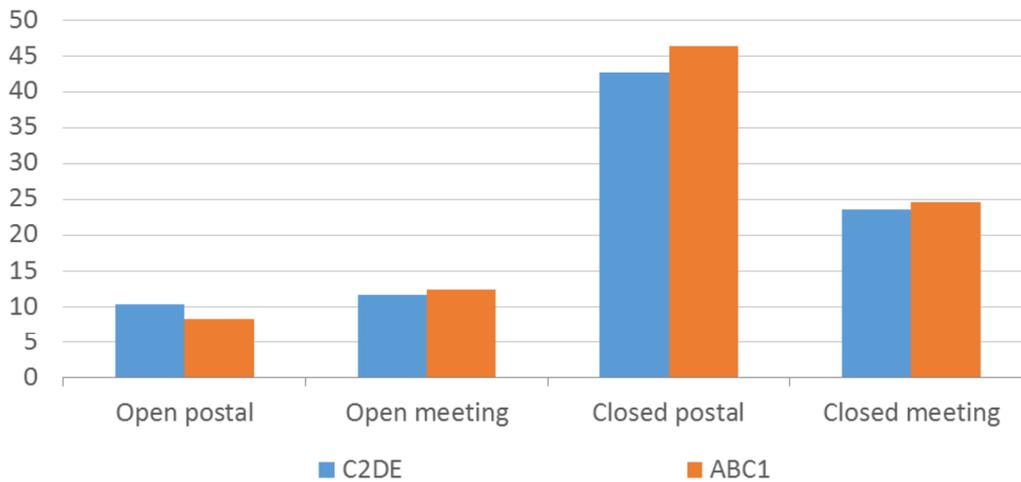
Nothing particularly eye-catching on age, other than the fact, perhaps, that one's expectation that the older members would be the ones to prefer not to have to go out to a meeting isn't borne out by the figures. Perhaps it's nice just to get out of the house now and then. Or perhaps it's what the older members are used to and old habits die hard

Method of selection and education



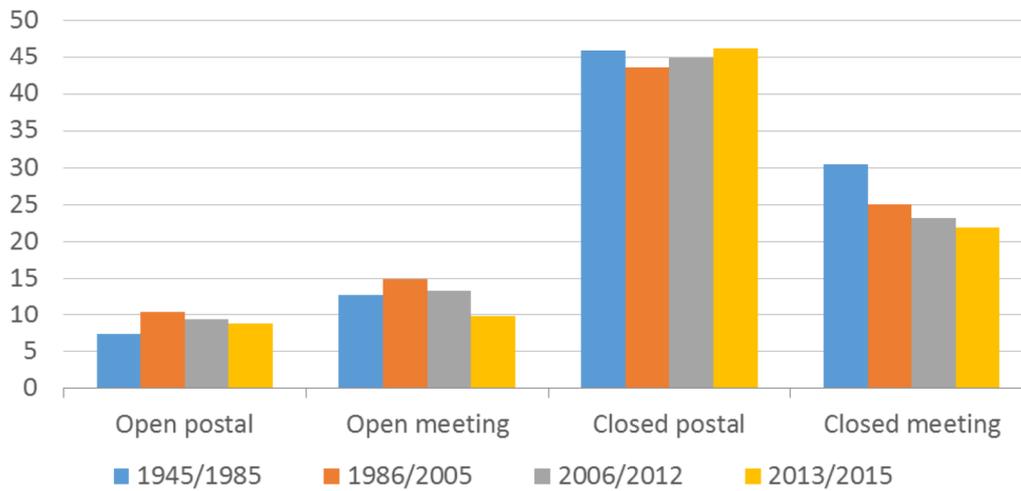
This one's quite interesting, possibly. Having educational capital doesn't make people markedly more keen on open methods – in fact they're less keen. One might suppose that, relatively speaking, they'd like a meeting where they could bring that educational capital and the skills that come with it to bear, but no. Actually, they're keenest of all on the closed postal method – possibly because they're most likely to be in professional jobs which keep them busy after 5pm?

Methods of selection and social class



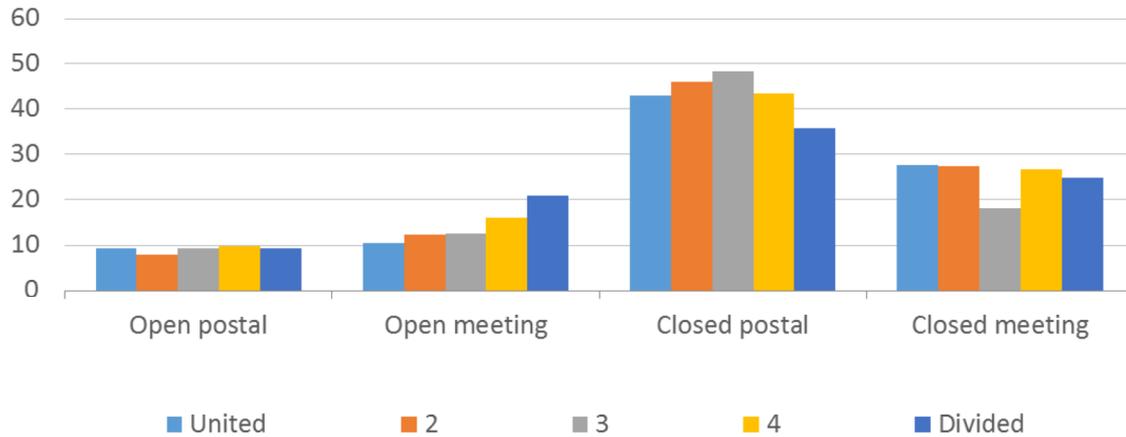
Nothing to see here at first glance but perhaps we might have expected those higher up the social ladder to have been markedly keener on meetings that might put them at an advantage but there's not a lot of difference. What you do see, however, if you put this together with social efficacy and education, is that those who have less of a sense of efficacy, less education and are generally less well-heeled do seem to show a consistently greater (if not much greater) preference for open postal primaries, hinting perhaps at a latent sense of alienation from fellow party members and/or more support for 'plebiscitary democracy.' It might be interesting to look at whether these same people are keener than most to see more working class MPs and fewer MPs with degrees.....

Methods of selection and time of joining the party



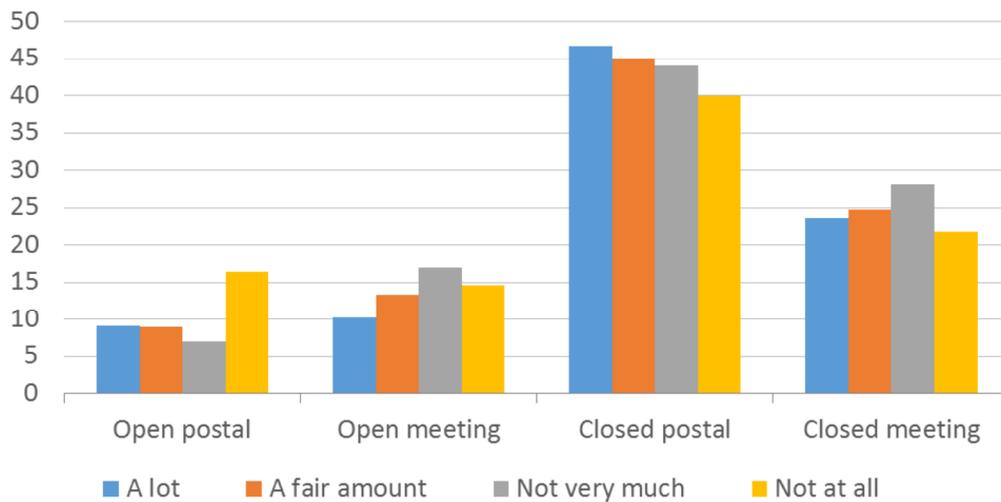
Back to the point about old habits dying hard: it looks to me as if the older members like it – relatively speaking anyway – how it always used to be, maybe minus the cigarette smoke and beery fumes for Labour members or the tang of cheese and wine for Tories.

Method of selection when local party is united or divided

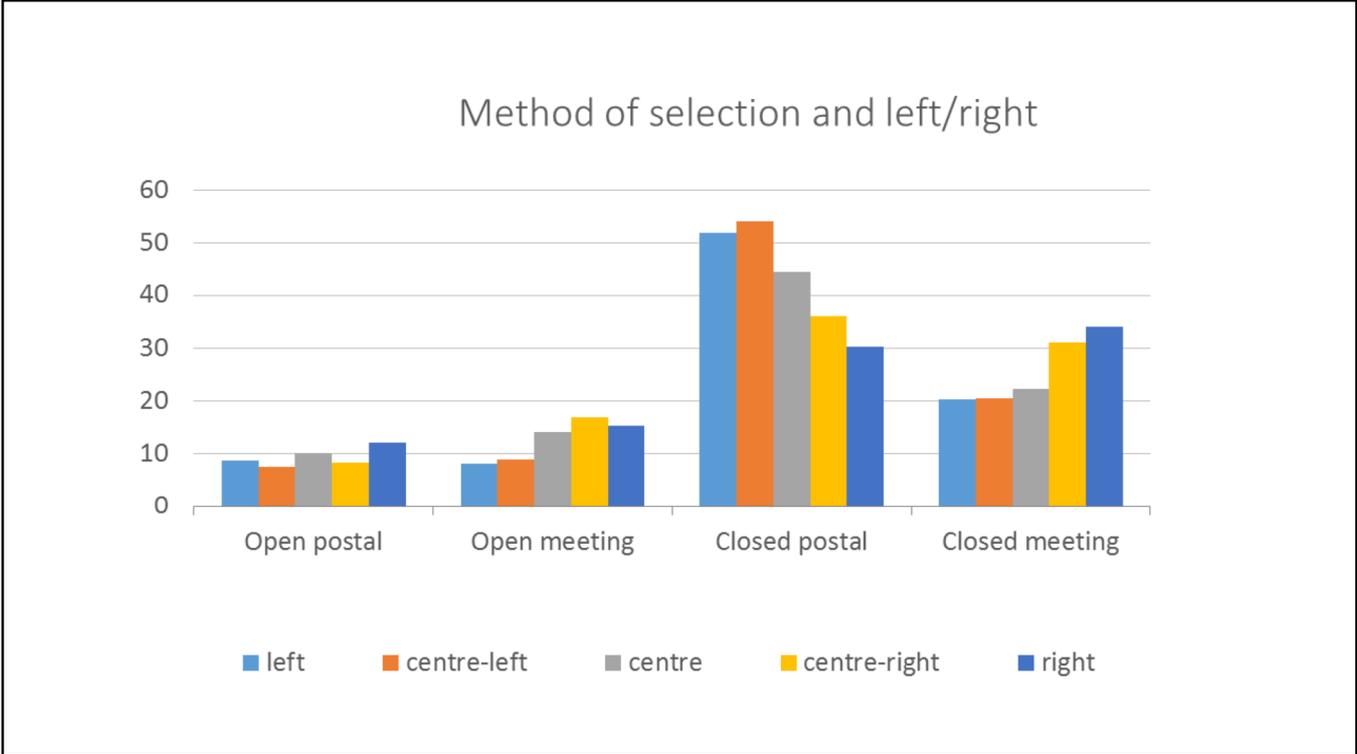


While one might have guessed that being in a party that is locally united might have made people happier to go to a selection meeting, that doesn't seem to make much difference: those members in a party which is divided don't seem noticeably keener to do the whole thing by post; perhaps they think they'd enjoy having it out at a meeting. What is interesting is that they are more likely that those from united parties to prefer an open meeting, perhaps hoping their fellow members will be on their best behaviour with guests in the room or that those guests might prefer their favourite candidate to the one favoured by their internal opponents!

Method of selection and feeling respected by the leadership



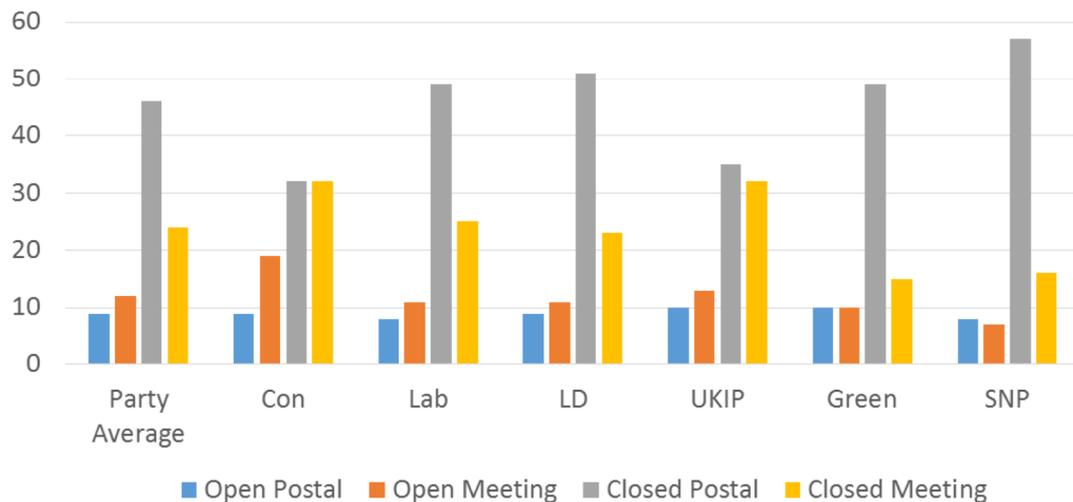
There's just the merest whiff of a suggestion that those who don't feel respected are rather keener than those who do on opening up selection but it's hard to guess why that might be – unless they think it would throw a spanner in the works and make a centrally-contrived stitch up less likely.



There are, on the other hand, some interesting differences here – the more inclined a party member is to place themselves on the right of the political spectrum, the more they seem to prefer real live meetings. That may have something to do with a belief in individual merit and mettle being something that’s important and something that can only be truly picked up in the flesh, but who knows.

Breaking it down by party...

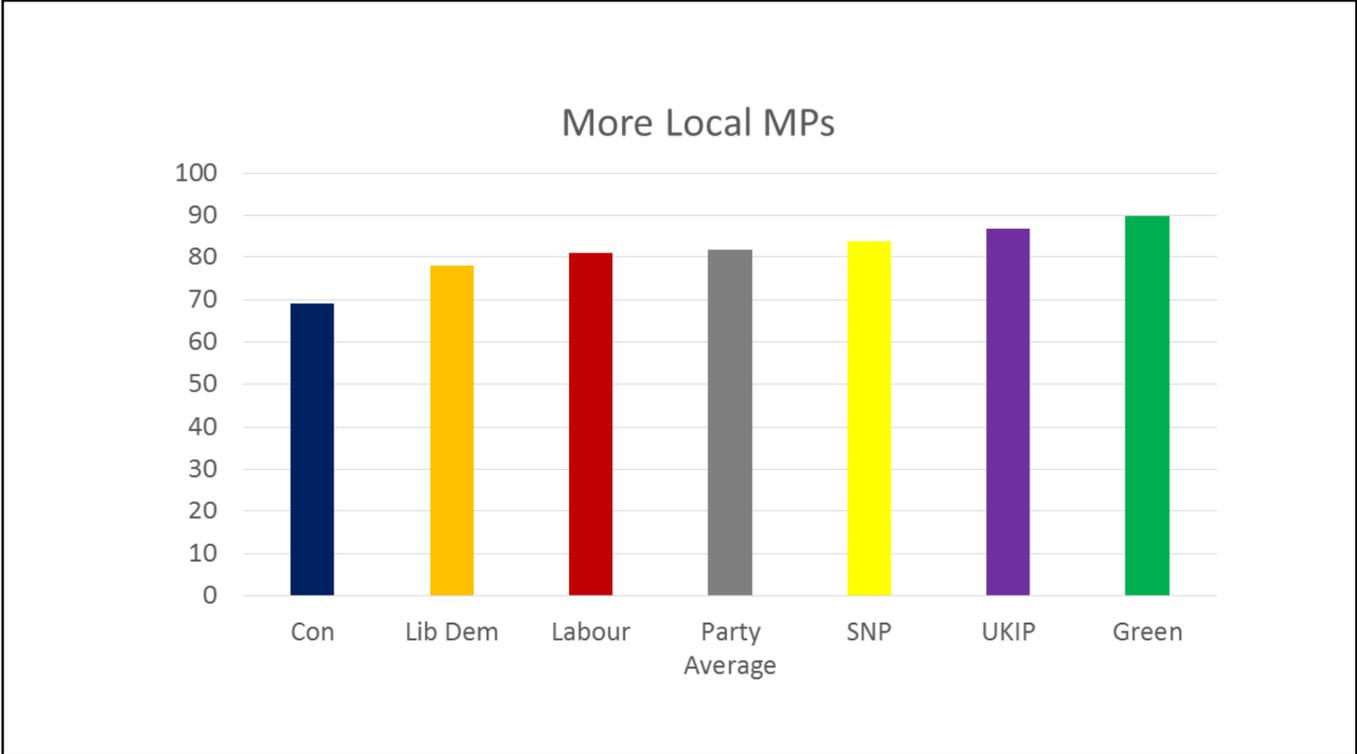
What's the best way to select candidates?



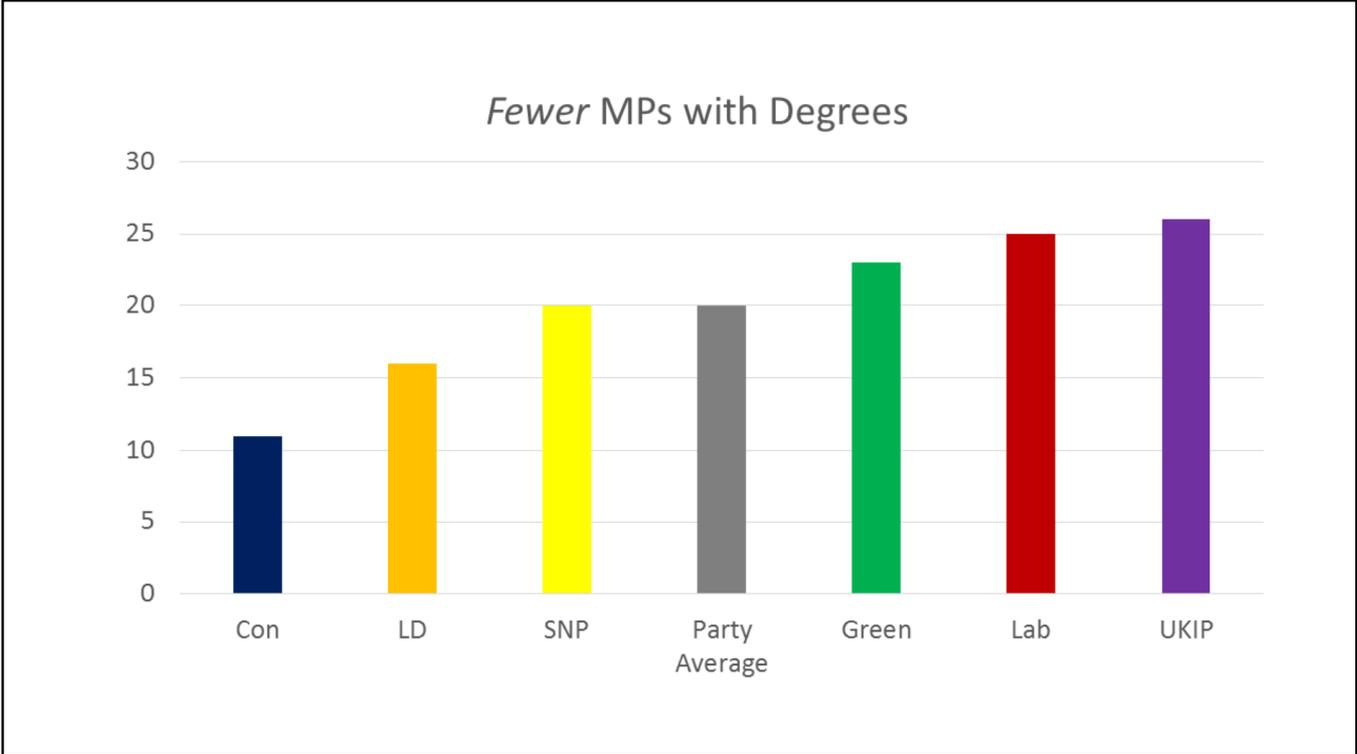
Taken together, closed postal primaries are the most popular option, followed by closed meetings, strongly suggesting that members of most parties would prefer to keep the privilege of selecting candidates to themselves. But there are differences. In some cases variation between parties members is very small – the obvious example is support (such as it is) for open postal primaries (the most permissive method of candidate selection). Variation between parties' members on the next most permissive method – open meetings – is pretty small too, although the fact that Conservative members are slightly more supportive is interesting, and may perhaps reflect the fact that their party has already experimented more than other parties with this method. Then again, the fact that support for the method among Tory members isn't much higher suggests that the experiment hasn't exactly been a roaring success. There is considerably more variation when it comes to support for closed postal ballots – the option which, given it obviates the need to come out and attend a meeting, one would perhaps expect to be the most popular. This is indeed easily the case when it comes to Labour, Lib Dem, Green and (especially) SNP members (perhaps it's those long, cold winter nights north of the border?). But Tory and UKIP members (who are amongst the oldest and perhaps therefore might have been expected to go for the 'pipe and slippers by the fireside' option!) are least keen on closed postal ballots and are instead much keener than average on the idea that members should turn up to meetings to make the decision. This might be, in the case of Conservative members anyway, because choosing the party's candidate is literally the only binding decision that the Tory Party (the least

internally democratic of the parties in our study) allows its members to make.

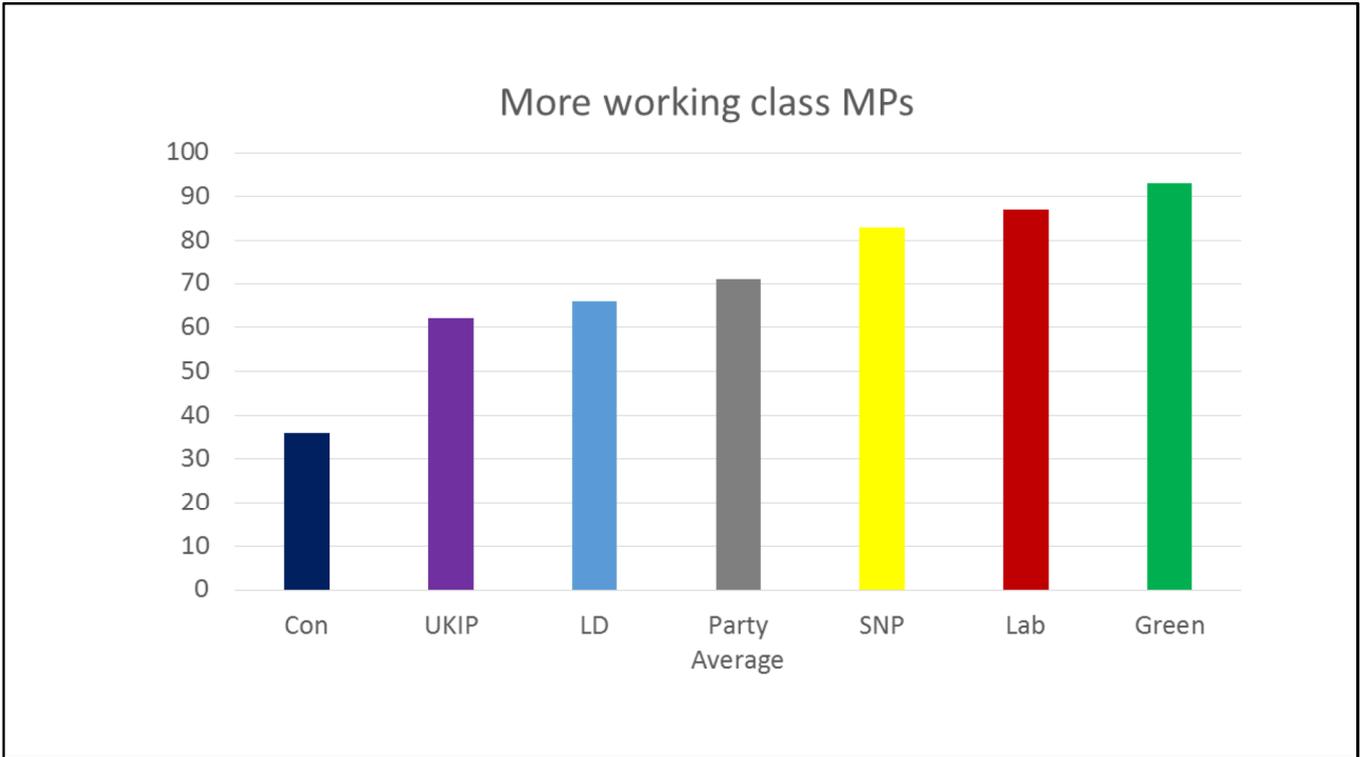
“To what extent do you believe that more or fewer MPs in Parliament should come from the following backgrounds?”



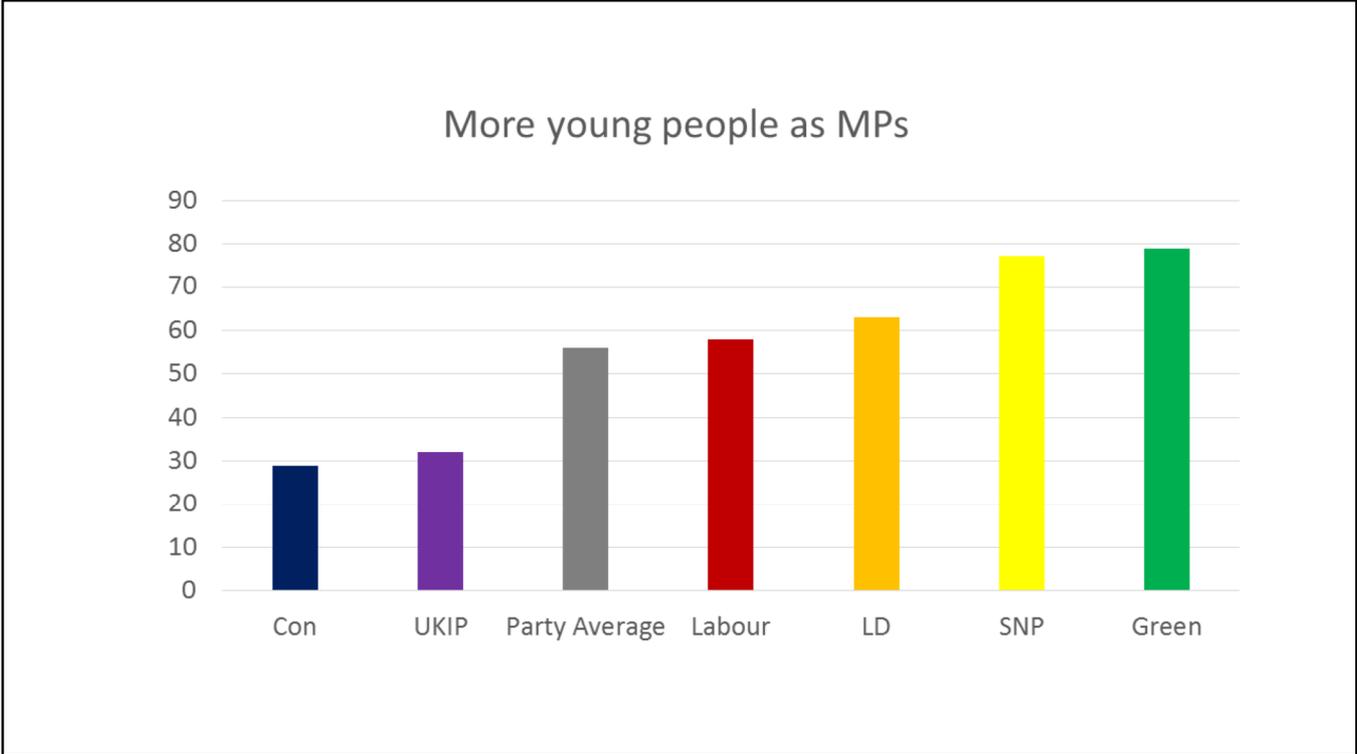
As we would expect given research by Phil and Rosie and others, members of all the parties are keen on the idea of parliament having more MPs who 'come from the area they represent'. There's very little variation, although perhaps as one might have guessed given their penchant for the local (as well as the global), the Greens are keenest of all. Possibly interestingly, the Tories are slightly less keen than members of other parties – perhaps because they continue (as Paul and Sarah's work showed) to believe very strongly in 'merit' and because they have a long history of 'carpet-bagging' candidates. That said (as Paul and Sarah also picked up on) the idea of where a candidate comes from being important was used as a counter to attempts under David Cameron to lever more women onto shortlists and the final round of voting.



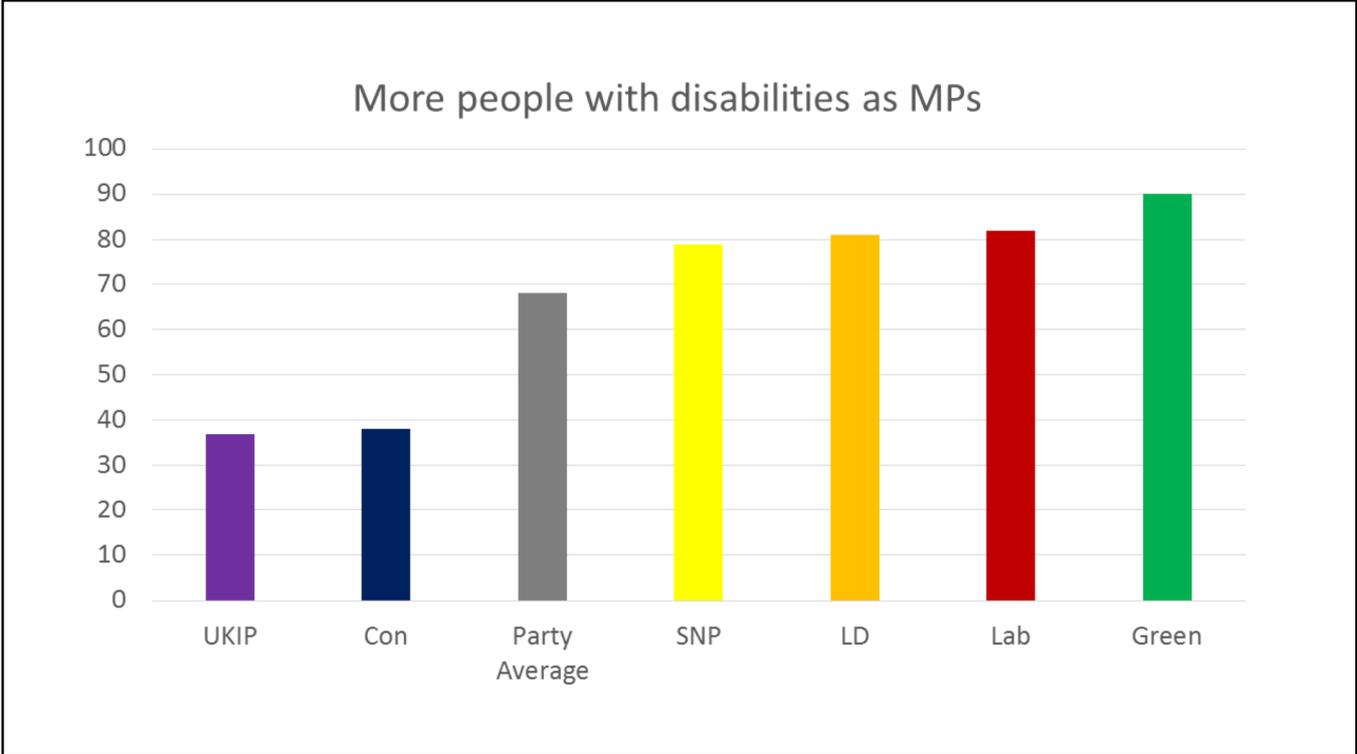
Asking whether party members would like to see more or fewer MPs with university degrees is the only time we see the number who reply 'fewer' outstripping the number who say 'more', although we should stress that the most common response by far to this question is 'about the same'. Nevertheless, the differences between members of the six parties are interesting if fairly predictable. UKIP members are far less likely to have a degree than their counterparts in other parties, so it may not be too surprising that they aren't particularly keen on a House of Commons packed full of graduates. Labour (and Green) members, however, are well educated, suggesting that their lack of enthusiasm stems more from their ideology than their demography. And Conservative Party members (almost certainly as a function of their age) aren't as well educated as members of most of the other parties, but they don't seem to have too much of a problem with graduates on the green benches – perhaps because many of their children (and grandchildren) will have gone to university even if they themselves didn't.



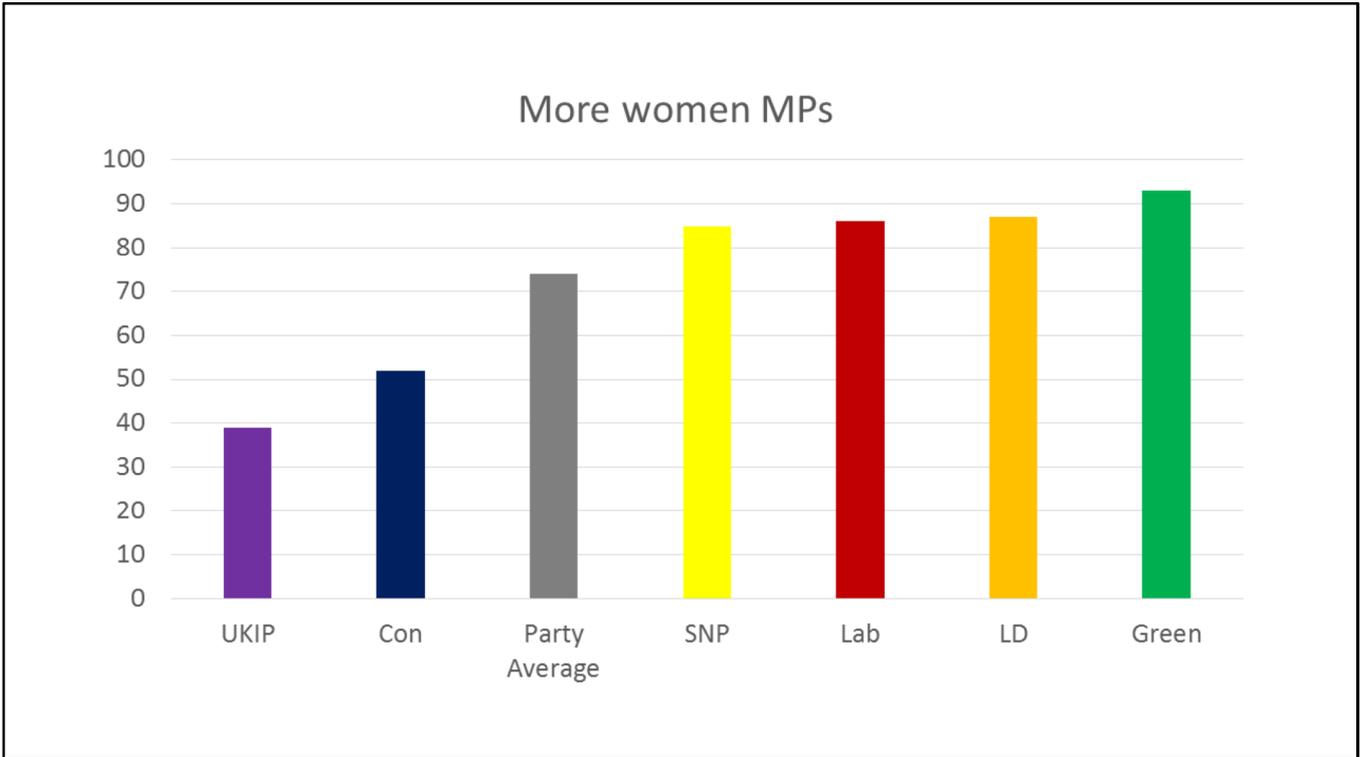
Green party members are generally pretty middle-class and very well-educated but they are keenest to see more working class people in parliament – a measure of their commitment to equality or their ‘political correctness’, depending on one’s point of view. Interesting, members of UKIP, in spite of its reputation for representing the ‘left-behind’ and challenging ‘the elite’ don’t seem as bothered about this one as one might have thought. And if anyone imagined Conservative Party members might have at least paid lip service to the idea that more ‘ordinary working class people’ (copyright Mrs T. May) should be elected to Westminster, they’d be wrong. Clearly, they may be the salt of the earth but they’re not the sort of people one actually wants in charge.



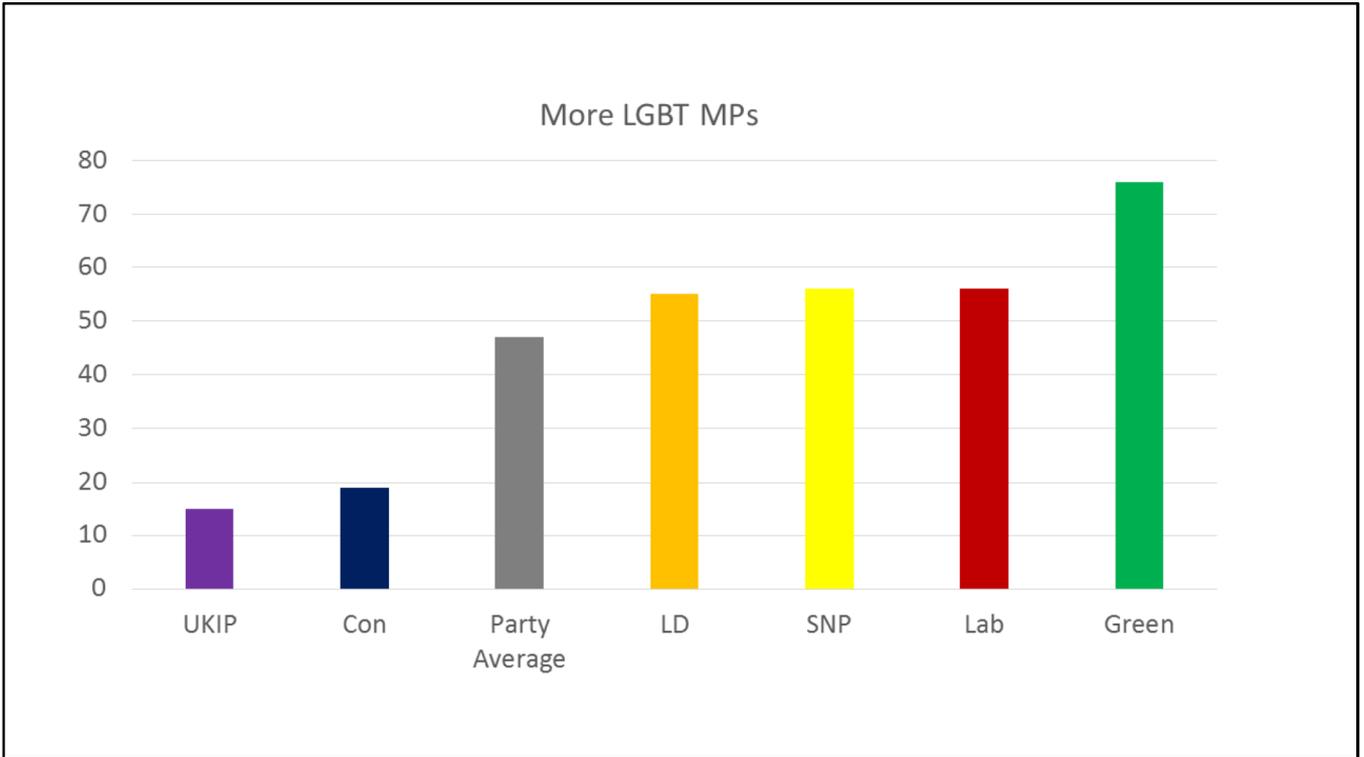
Conservative members might not mind so much about graduates getting into parliament but they would seem to want them to get a little life experience first: they, along with UKIP, are noticeably less keen on more young people becoming MPs than are members of other parties. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact members of those parties are no spring chickens. Certainly there is a huge difference between their pretty lukewarm response to this question and the very positive one given by Green Party members, who tend to be a good deal younger than members of other parties. Their response might also have something to do with the fact that they want innovative, 'new politics' solutions to the country's (and the world's) problems – solutions that are presumably more likely to come from fresh-faced rather than crusty old politicians. But it may well be driven, too, by a stronger belief (whether implicit or explicit) in descriptive representation – something may well be dismissed as (politically correct) 'tokenism' by Conservative and UKIP members.



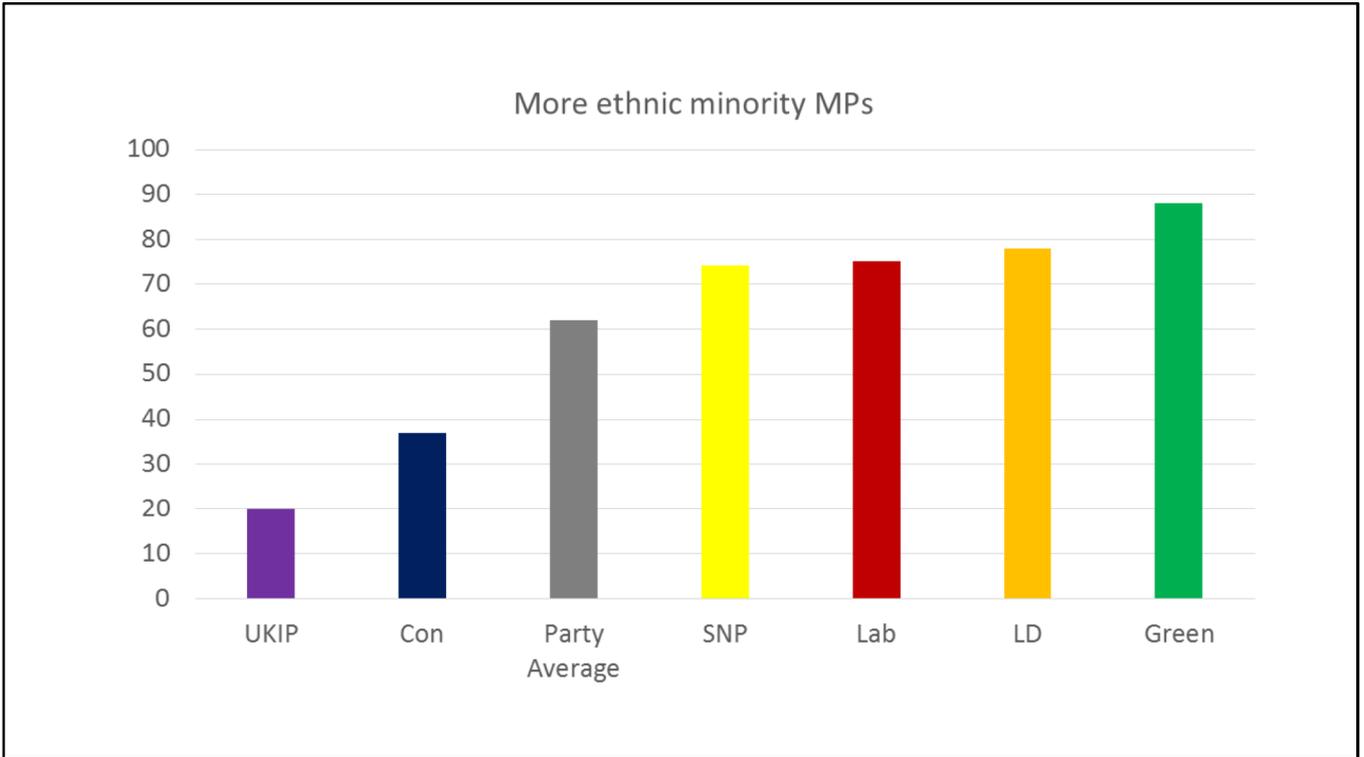
That variations between members of different parties have as much to do with ideology as demography (although of course the two are sometimes related) seems to be confirmed when we ask people about people with disabilities – a question which produces what will become a familiar pattern of responses, putting Tory and UKIP members at one end of the spectrum with the Greens at the other end and the other parties appearing somewhere in between them (and with little variation between them). Tory and UKIP members are much less likely to want to see more people with disabilities in the Commons than Greens, and indeed members of other parties, many of whom presumably share their enthusiasm for a parliament which is better representative of all sections of society but which would presumably conflict to some extent with conservative notions of meritocracy.



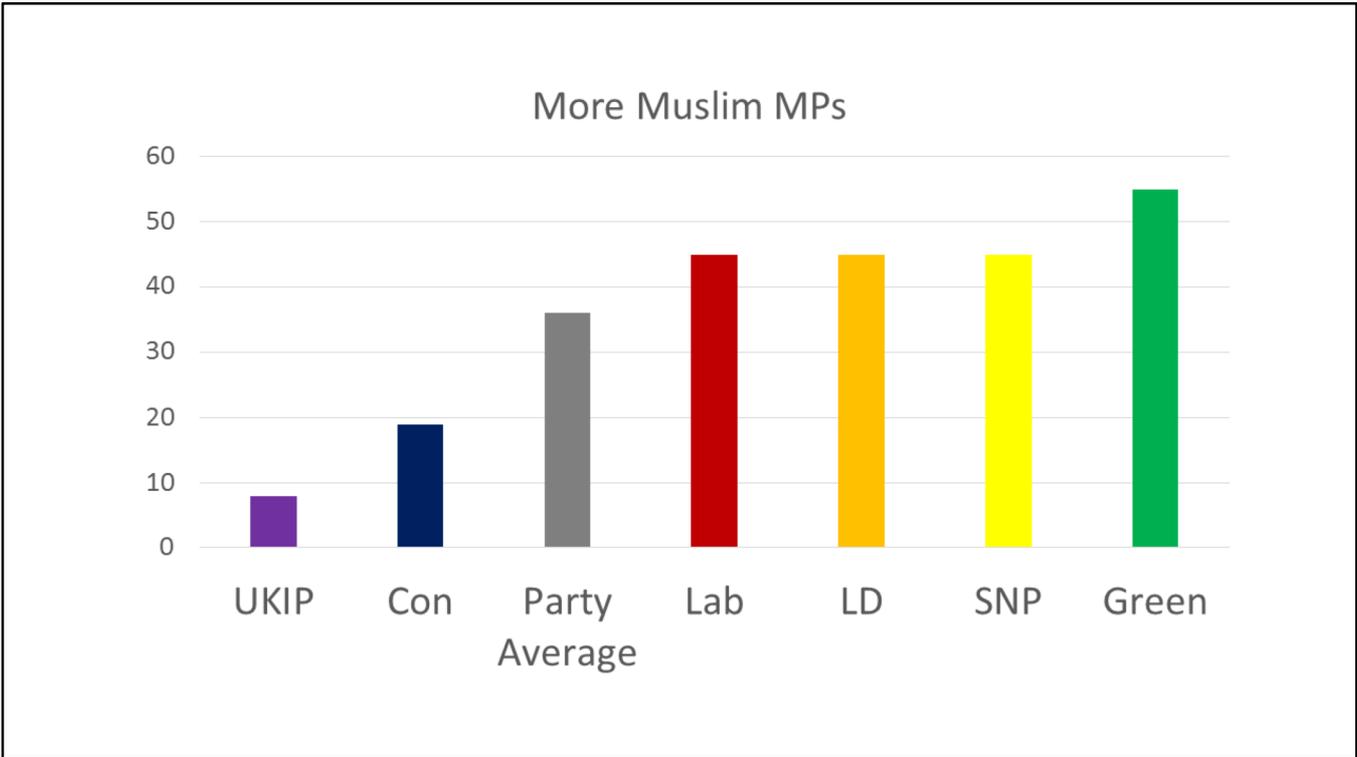
The most-discussed section of society which is underrepresented in parliaments the world over is, of course women. Clearly members of the four left of centre parties have absorbed the message that the situation needs changing, with the Greens (whose only representative in the House of Commons is female) not unexpectedly in the vanguard. Equally predictably, members of UKIP, which tends to reject anything that smacks of political correctness think very differently. Perhaps more interesting is the response of Tory members. As we know from Paul and Sarah's work, the leadership still has some way to go to persuade the grassroots that things have to change on this front, but it does appear to have made some progress over the years: although they are clearly not as keen on the idea as their counterparts on the left of the political spectrum, over half of Tory members would like to see more women MPs. The enthusiasm of Lib Dem members is worth noting since the Party has a very poor record of getting women into winnable seats; of course, members responses may to some extent present a pricking of their consciences following a general election that saw their party return not a single female MP to the Commons.



Although the House of Commons can boast one of the biggest proportions of openly gay MPs of any legislature in the world, some would argue that it has some way to go before it becomes fully representative when it comes to sexuality – and there are no transgender MPs at Westminster. Green members would obviously like to see this change – as would the majority of members of the parties to the left of centre. Once again, though, members of the right-of-centre parties don't feel this is particularly important and, indeed, in UKIP's case there are more members (some 25%) who would like to see fewer LGBT people in parliament than would like to see more (15%). This isn't quite true of Tory members, although the gap is small, with 19% saying they would like to see more LGBT MPs and 16% saying they would like to see fewer.



On the question of ethnic minority representation, we see, once again, the by-now familiar pattern. Green members, living up to their image as social liberal, are, as expected, most enthusiastic about the idea of having more MPs from minority background, with members of the other left-of-centre parties not so very far behind. Conservative members, once again, are much less keen, although once again their lack of enthusiasm is not as marked as their counterparts in UKIP. Not for the first time, the number of UKIP members saying they would like to see more of a particular section of society represented in parliament (at 20%) is lower than the number saying they would like to see *fewer* MPs coming from that background (ie 22%). That said, it is vitally important, before anyone goes away with the impression that they are all a bunch of bigots, to note that around half of all UKIP and Conservative members would be content to see things pretty much as they are in this respect.



UKIP members' decidedly lukewarm response to the idea that the UK should have more ethnic minority MPs is more than matched by their response to the idea that there should be more Muslim MPs – indeed, the number of UKIP members who feel there should be more (at just 8%) is dwarfed by the number (45%) who say there should be fewer. Members of other parties aren't as keen on there being more Muslims as they are on there being more MPs from other minorities – and even the majority of Green members who think there should be is, at 55%, relatively low. Unfortunately, given high-profile the issue has become for Labour, we didn't ask about Jewish MPs. But we did ask party members whether they'd like to see more Christian MPs. Interestingly, this is the one minority where the number of members of the left-of-centre parties saying they would like to see more of them in parliament was exceeded by the number saying they would like to see fewer of them (although it should be said that the most frequent answer was 'about the same'). While any implicit or explicit anti- or a-religious feeling among Green members did not seem to stop a majority of them wanting to see more Muslims, it may have combined with their anti-establishment attitudes to see some 46% of them say that they'd like to see fewer Christians at Westminster.

A few take-home points:

- When it comes to method of selection, members clearly prefer the option that maximizes their influence but minimizes their effort, namely closed postal ballots.
- Generally speaking, they still prefer to go postal, but those who are relatively keen on meetings are the more active, those with a greater sense of efficacy, those who've been members for longer, and those who are more right wing (which may account for why UKIP and Tory members seem keener on selection meetings than the rest).
- When it comes to the sort of MPs members would like to see more or fewer of, party differences are significant and there's an obvious pattern

A few more take-home points:

- Green on one end of the spectrum, UKIP and Tories on the other, just to one side of the party average, and then on the other side (often pretty near to the Greens) Lib Dem, Labour and SNP members
- Those on that side of the fence, with the Greens in the vanguard, want to see more of the groups those on the other side of the fence probably see as symbolising political correctness (gone mad), especially when it comes to ethnicity and Islam.
- The only time this pattern doesn't prevail is when members are asked about MPs with degrees.
- Whether this – or any of this – actually influences selections is another matter!