

# THE TIMES

NEWS

## Revealed: the typical political party member

Paul Webb

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Although it didn't, as usual, get much of a say on anything at its conference in Manchester, the Conservative Party's membership matters.

That's not just because the members might (sooner rather than later, some Tory MPs clearly hope) have a say in who replaces Theresa May. It's also because they are the people who carry the fight and help project the party's image to British voters. And at the moment that image, as well as being divided, is still pretty pale, male and stale.

But how different is that from any of the other main parties?

The Party Members Project that I work on with Tim Bale and Monica Poletti, both of Queen Mary University of London, is a research project funded by the Economic & Social Research Council which has enabled us, among other things, to survey samples of party members after the 2015 and 2017 general elections.

Since parties are not in the habit of providing researchers with official national party membership lists from which random samples can be generated, we commissioned YouGov to help us, drawing respondents from their huge panel of ordinary citizens.

So, what does the YouGov data we gathered immediately after the general election in June tell us? Most obviously, it suggests that members across all parties are largely white, male, middle-class and educated.

There is something of a distinction between the two right-wing parties (Conservative and Ukip) and the other parties in most regards. Both are characterised by a particularly marked preponderance of men among their memberships, are especially white in their ethnic profiles, and are decidedly more aged than the other parties.

Tories are 57 years old on average and more than two-fifths of them are over 65. Kippers have an even more venerable profile, with more than half of them entitled to draw their state pension.

In two related respects, though, Ukip and the Tories do differ significantly. Ukip, inasmuch as it still exists as a going concern under its new leader (perhaps there should be a prize for guessing his name!), is a far less middle-class and educated party than the Conservatives. While 86 per cent of Tories are categorised as ABC1s in terms of occupational profile, and 40 per cent are graduates, the respective figures for Ukip members are 66 per cent and 20 per cent.

SNP members are not as well educated as their “progressive” rivals, Labour and the Greens but all three boast younger memberships than the Tories and Ukip. Only 29 per cent of Labour members, 25 per cent of SNP members and 17 per cent of Greens are over 65.

Unsurprisingly, the Tories and (especially) Ukip can call on proportionately fewer members under the age of 50 so the widely-reported Tory angst regarding the future of their activist base is not unfounded. Unless they can turn things around quickly in terms of their appeal to young people, they will gradually see their army of willing campaign footsoldiers dwindle.

Seen in this light, Theresa May’s recent policy announcements relating to student tuition fees and housebuilding make obvious sense, although how much effect they will have on young voters and (potential) activists remains to be seen.

The Tories also need to worry, if they retain their ambition to be a truly national party, about the regional spread of their membership. True, the fact that a third of them live in London and the southeast reflects the fact that the latter is their heartland, but the Conservatives may need to extend their activist base in other parts of the country if they are once again to win a majority of seats with a plurality of votes — something they signally failed to do in 2017.

Finally, there is little variation across the parties’ memberships when it comes to ethnicity so while the Tories are, indeed, more male and stale than their rivals, they aren’t that much more pale. That, however, says less about them and more about the failure of all the country’s parties to attract black and minority ethnic people into their ranks. Paul Webb is professor of politics at the University of Sussex

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