



# Grey Power

Young people missing from politics

By David Kingman and Cameron Leitch  
Intergenerational Foundation





The Intergenerational Foundation ([www.if.org.uk](http://www.if.org.uk)) is an independent, non-party-political charity that exists to protect the rights of younger and future generations in British policy-making. While increasing longevity is to be welcomed, our changing national demographic and expectations of entitlement are placing increasingly heavy burdens on younger and future generations. From housing, health and education, to employment, taxation, pensions, voting, spending and environmental degradation, younger generations are under increasing pressure to maintain the intergenerational compact while losing out disproportionately to older, wealthier cohorts. IF questions this status quo, calling instead for sustainable long-term policies that are fair to all – the old, the young, and those to come.

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## Foreword

Over the past decade, the UK has experienced successive waves of crisis: from the Great Recession to austerity politics, to the climate emergency, to the Covid-19 pandemic. As the pioneering work of the Intergenerational Foundation has shown, younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) have borne the brunt of the crises through, for example, the increasing costs of housing, the proliferation of precarious and low-paid employment, and the trebling of university tuition fees.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the ongoing pandemic, the immediate health risks are clearly much greater for older generations, but the negative economic consequences are worse for younger generations and will be felt for decades.

Despite the recent increase in political engagement of young people in British democracy – the “youthquake” in youth political participation<sup>2</sup> – the voices of younger generations are rarely listened to by those in government, with damaging effects for the public policy in the UK. Policy programmes that neglect the interests of young people are, by their very nature, reactive and short-term in their outlook.

For these reasons, it is essential that the views of young people are more fully represented in policy-making at all levels of government.

This report shines a light on the extent of “grey power” in the UK. Over a decade ago, the ex-German President, Roman Herzog, observing the ageing of established industrialised democracies, warned of the emergence of a “pensioner democracy”. “The report finds that 18 to 30 year olds in the UK make up less than 3% of MPS and less than 10% of local councillors, compared to 15% of the population as a whole.”

Research on the representation of women and ethnic minority groups in parliaments provides evidence that ‘descriptive representation’ (proportionate representation of different groups in parliament) leads to ‘substantive representation’ (representation of those groups’ interests in public policy).<sup>3</sup> And, we can look to many international examples of young politicians – from New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, to Michael Tubbs, Mayor of Stockton (California) – to see how their fresh outlooks can have an energising effect on countries and communities.

The evidence provided in this report, therefore, highlights the current state of affairs in the UK, and shows why we must do better in our efforts to rejuvenate British democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> See Intergenerational Foundation research reports: <https://www.if.org.uk/research>

<sup>2</sup> Sloam, J. and Ehsan, M.R. (2017) Youth Quake: Young people and the 2017 General Election, London: Intergenerational Foundation: <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/youth-quake-young-people-2017-general-election>; and Sloam, J. and Henn, M. (2019) Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain, London: Palgrave: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-97469-9>

<sup>3</sup> Mansbridge, J. (1999) “Should blacks represent blacks and women represent women? A contingent ‘yes’”. *The Journal of Politics*, 61, 628-57; Preuhs, R. (2006) The conditional effects of minority descriptive representation: Black legislators and policy influence in the American states *The Journal of Politics*, 68(3), 585-599.



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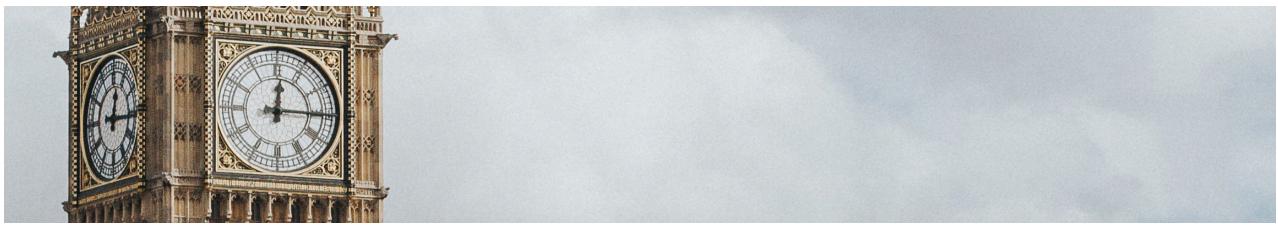
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## Executive summary

- IF wanted to research how well young adults are represented among elected politicians in the United Kingdom at both the national and local level, and how this has changed over time.
- The median age of MPs elected at the 2019 general election was 51, compared to a median age of 40 among the UK's population.
- The median age of members of the House of Lords was 72 in 2019, and it had risen from 60 in 1979.
- Adults aged 18 to 29 have persistently been very underrepresented in both houses of parliament: this age group currently accounts for about 15% of the entire UK population, but only 17 MPs and no members of the House of Lords belong to it.
- Historically, the membership of the House of Commons has tended to overrepresent adults aged between 40 and 59 - almost 70% of current MPs belong to this age group - and severely underrepresent adults who are younger than this in relation to their share of the population.
- The number of Millennial MPs is slowly increasing - there are now 80 Millennial MPs compared to only 1 after the 2005 general election - but Millennials are still underrepresented compared to their share of the UK's population.
- It has historically been quite rare for any politicians who are under the age of 40 to serve as cabinet ministers, and vanishingly rare for any who are under the age of 30 to do so; despite being one of the youngest cabinets in history, the current cabinet only contains a single MP who is under the age of 40.
- While newly-elected MPs tend to be younger than MPs as a whole are, at every general election since 1979 there have been more newly-elected MPs who were aged over 50 than there have been who were aged 18 to 29, and at recent general elections the number of new MPs who were aged 18 to 29 has been smaller than the number who were over 60.
- Based on our analysis of the Register of Members' Interests, there are a large number of older MPs who receive rental income from property: almost 1 in 5 current MPs has declared that they receive £10,000 per year or more in rental income, of whom 91% are over 40 and two-thirds are over 50.
- Many other European countries have a much higher proportion of Millennials in their national parliaments than the UK does; these include some of the UK's closest neighbours such as Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy.
- Looking at data on local councillors in England and Wales, their average age is 59, which is much higher than the population average.
- In 2018, 79% of local councillors were over the age of 50, and 57% were above the age of 60, compared to 37% and 24% of the UK population respectively. Meanwhile, only about 3% of local councillors were under the age of 30 and less than 10% were under the age of 40.
- The report argues that the continuing underrepresentation of young adults in British politics doesn't have to be inevitable, given that huge improvements have been made over the past few decades in increasing the participation of previously underrepresented groups such as women and ethnic minorities.



- The proportion of female MPs has increased from just 3% in 1979 to almost 33% now, while the share of MPs from a BAME background has risen from 1% in 1987 to around 10%. This shows that more young people could get elected as politicians if the UK's major parties made it a bigger priority.



# 1. Introduction

Ever since it was founded in 2011, the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) has been particularly concerned about whether young adults are being adequately represented by the UK's political system.

Whether politicians represent young adults is important for two reasons. Firstly, there is now a large amount of evidence which shows that today's young adults have endured stagnating living standards in comparison to those enjoyed by previous generations when they were at the same stage in life,<sup>1</sup> and participating in representative democracy is the main channel through which socio-economic inequalities can be challenged in the UK. Secondly, there is also growing evidence that age has become a strong predictor of the political attitudes which people hold, so if younger people aren't being represented by the UK's elected politicians then that makes it more likely that their distinctive set of attitudes on many of the key issues facing the country aren't being represented in political decision-making.

In 2012, IF published an analysis of the demographic profile of elected local councillors in England,<sup>2</sup> which showed that the people who were serving as local councillors were significantly older than the average age of the UK population, as well as being more likely to be male, white and to hold a degree than average. Our analysis also suggested that local councillors were more likely to be homeowners than the general population, which provided possible evidence to suggest that their economic self-interest was unlikely to align with that of young adults as they had an incentive to advocate against policies which could result in lower house prices.

With this report, we wanted to not only update our previous work, but also extend its scope to include looking at the age profile of members of both the House of Commons and House of Lords. We also wanted to make comparisons of how the representativeness of politicians in the UK has changed over time, and also how it compares to the situation in other developed countries.

The report is divided into the following sections: Section 2 fleshes out some of the theoretical arguments which explain why we should be concerned whether the demographic composition of our elected politicians matches that of the people whom they represent; Section 3 then presents the findings from our analysis, and Section 4 presents our conclusions and recommendations. The methodology explaining how we undertook our research is provided as an Appendix.

<sup>1</sup> House of Lords (2019) *Tackling Intergenerational Unfairness*, London: House of Lords

<sup>2</sup> Kingman, D. and Leach, J. (2012) *How the Localism Act hands power to older generations*, London: Intergenerational Foundation: <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/how-the-localism-act-hands-power-to-older-generations/>



## 2. Why does it matter if young people are underrepresented?

Compared to other aspects of diversity, such as gender and ethnicity, it could be argued that age tends to receive relatively little attention in the debate about whether politicians are representative enough of the communities who elect them. This is interesting, given that there is evidence to show that age is actually one of the areas in which the UK's politicians are the least representative of the wider electorate, and where progress at becoming more representative has been the slowest, in comparison to the improvements in other forms of inclusivity which have been witnessed in UK politics over recent decades.

For example, almost 34% of the MPs elected at the 2019 UK general election were female, compared with only 3% at the 1979 election, while the proportion of MPs who come from a BAME background has grown from under 1% in 1987 to almost 10% in 2019. By contrast, as will be explained in more detail in the next section, the age profile of MPs has changed very little since 1979, with young adults remaining very underrepresented throughout this period.<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons why it could be argued that age diversity isn't something we need to worry about. Firstly, age is fundamentally different from most other aspects of diversity because everyone experiences belonging to different age groups; in other words, every MP who makes it to the age of 50 has lived experience of being younger, whereas most MPs who are able-bodied won't have any experience of being disabled, for example. Not to mention that the whole notion of representative democracy has always rested to some extent on the idea that a community's interests can be represented effectively by politicians who don't necessarily have that much in common with the people whom they represent on a personal level.

Secondly, there is an argument that having too many younger politicians would actually be detrimental to the political process, as they wouldn't have enough experience of life to inform their political decisions, whereas having older MPs could be seen as a good thing, particularly if it means that they are able to distinguish themselves in a field outside politics first before bringing those experiences to bear on their political work.

Thirdly, as IF has shown in some of our previous work, younger members of the electorate are the age group which is least likely to participate in democratic politics through voting.<sup>4</sup> While we would argue that this is because of structural barriers which make it more difficult for younger voters to participate in elections (and there is research to show that today's young adults are just as interested in politics as previous generations were, but they find it more meaningful to engage in politics in non-traditional ways, such as supporting single-issue online campaigns),<sup>5</sup> it could be argued that this suggests that young adults themselves are not particularly concerned about being underrepresented among elected politicians.

<sup>3</sup> Barton, C. et al. (2020) *Social background of Members of Parliament 1979-2019*, London: House of Commons Library

<sup>4</sup> Kingman, D. (2019) *Where could young voters make the most difference in the 2019 general election?* London: Intergenerational Foundation

<sup>5</sup> Kitanova, M. (2019) "Youth political participation in the EU: evidence from a cross-national analysis" *Journal of Youth Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1636951



However, IF strongly believes that the age profile of the politicians who get elected in the UK does need to better reflect the age profile of the country itself. Firstly, although it can be argued that older politicians can understand and represent the concerns of young adults, it's important to emphasise the things which make today's young adults - the Millennial generation - unique, and therefore quite distinct from any generation which has gone before them.

The Millennial generation differs from previous generations in the UK in a couple of very important respects. In economic terms, there is now a large body of evidence which shows that the members of this generation have endured a particular set of economic problems in the first part of their adult lives which are unique in comparison to previous generations. Stagnant income growth means that Millennials who are in their twenties are only earning roughly the same amount that people in this age group were in the mid-1990s in real terms, despite the fact that Millennials are much more likely to have a university degree; they are also much less likely to be homeowners than members of previous generations were, they are much more likely to be renting or living with their parents for longer, and they are burdened by significantly higher student debts if they went to university.<sup>6</sup>

It could be argued that MPs who belong to older generations which came of age under a less challenging set of economic conditions will not be able to fully comprehend the specific set of economic disadvantages which Millennials are facing, or will not accord the same level of priority to ameliorating them. Indeed, particularly where housing is concerned, there is likely to be a direct conflict between the economic interests of politicians who belong to older generations and Millennials, as the politicians are likely to own their own homes and have a vested interest in rising house prices (the issue of home ownership among politicians is analysed specifically later on in this report).

Another important respect in which Millennials differ from older generations in the UK is when it comes to political and social attitudes. Age was recently described by the polling firm YouGov as “the biggest dividing line in British politics”, because someone’s age has been the single most accurate predictor of which party they would vote for at each of the past two UK general elections.<sup>7</sup> IF’s own research has also highlighted that age was one of the most significant dividing lines in the 2016 referendum of Britain’s membership of the EU.<sup>8</sup> The extent of this age divide has been identified as a relatively recent phenomenon in British politics, as it used to be class which was the most significant factor which determined who someone would vote for. If younger voters’ political views genuinely tend to be distinct from those of older voters, then it may be less likely that older politicians can represent them effectively.

Finally, there is also an important argument about democratic legitimacy. It seems axiomatic that a democratic political system is more legitimate if the people who get elected are more representative of the wider electorate, as it means political decision-making benefits from politicians possessing a wider range of attitudes and personal experience. It seems plausible to suggest that if there were more young politicians in the UK then it would also encourage young adults to engage more with politics in general, as it would make politicians seem more relatable to them and their everyday lives.

<sup>6</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Intergenerational Fairness and Provision (2019) Tackling intergenerational unfairness, London: House of Lords

<sup>7</sup> YouGov (2019) How Britain voted in the 2019 general election, London: YouGov

<sup>8</sup> Kingman, D. (2017) Generation Remain: Understanding the Millennial Vote London: Intergenerational Foundation



## 3. Results

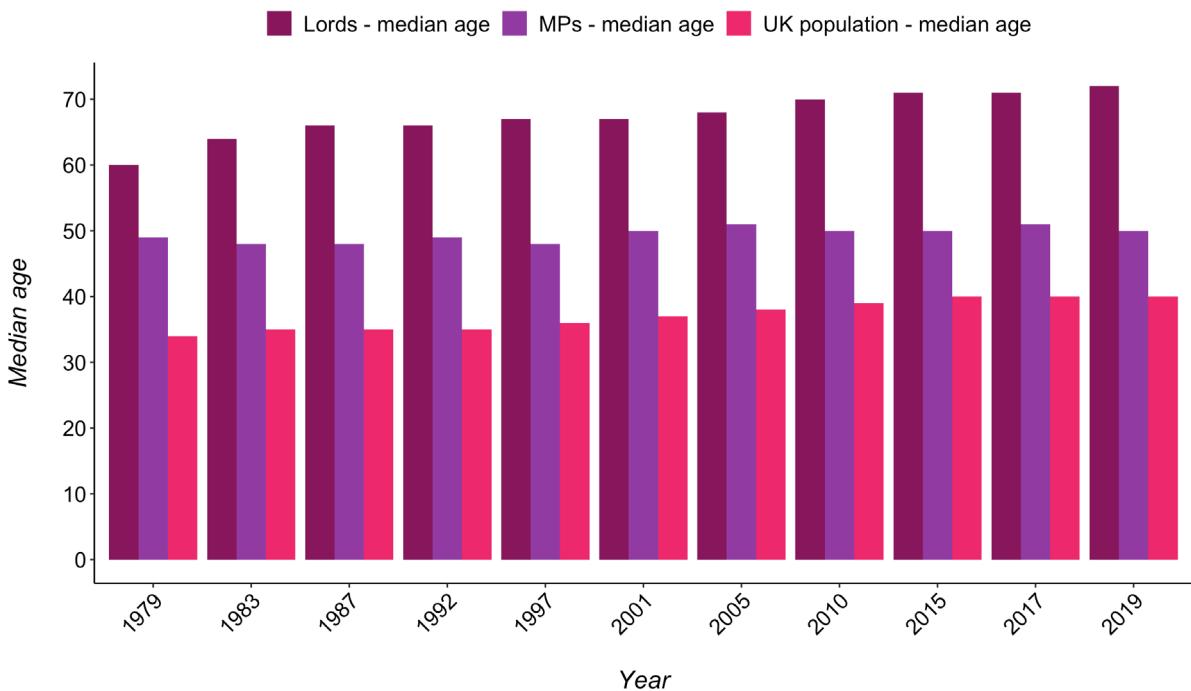
The results of this research have been broken down into two different sections: the first part looks at how age representative national politicians are in the UK (MPs and members of the House of Lords) and the second part looks at how age-representative local politicians (local councillors) are in England.

### 3a. How representative is the age profile of national politicians in the UK?

By comparing data from the UK parliament's data platform with estimates of the age structure of the UK's population from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), we can see how the average ages of members of the House of Commons and House of Lords have compared to the average age of the UK population following every general election since 1979:



**How do the average ages of politicians compare to the general public?**



Source: ONS mid-year UK population estimates and House of Commons Library  
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**Fig.1 Median ages of MPs, Lords and the UK population, 1979-2019**

The data displayed in Fig.1 show that the median age of the MPs who have been elected at each general election since 1979 has remained quite stable: it was 50 in 1979 and had increased only to 51 by the 2019 general election. By contrast, the median age of members of the House of Lords has increased by a much greater amount: it was 60 in 1979 and had risen to 72 by 2019.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Although the House of Lords isn't elected, the years of general elections were used for the sake of comparison with the House of Commons; this figure is simply the median age of the members who belonged to the upper house at the time of each general election.



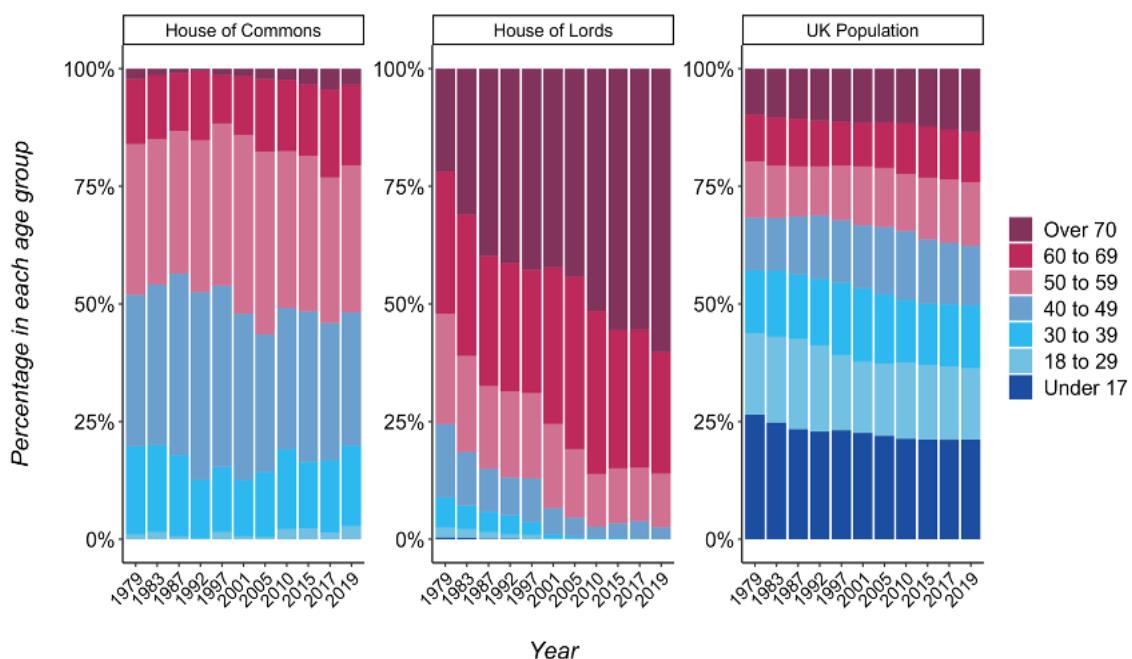
Fig.1 demonstrates that the median age of the members of both houses of parliament has always been significantly higher than that of the UK population, which was 34 in 1979 and had risen to 40 by 2019 because of the gradual ageing of the UK's population.

It could be argued that just looking at the median ages of these three groups doesn't really provide a fair comparison, because the median age of the UK's population is lowered by the existence of children, whereas children can't become MPs or sit as Lords.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, parliamentarians are supposed to take decisions on behalf of the entire UK population, including the UK's children, so this serves as a comparison between the age profile of parliamentarians and the age profile of the people whom they are supposed to represent, not just the population which is actually eligible to become MPs or Lords.

We can also break down these three groups into age groups in order to get a more detailed idea of which age groups are being over- or underrepresented



### How do the age groups which politicians belong to compare to the UK population?



Source: ONS mid-year UK population estimates and House of Commons Library  
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**Fig.2 MPs, Lords and the UK population broken down by age group, 1979-2019**

A few things stand out immediately from Fig.2. Firstly, adults aged 18 to 29 have persistently been very underrepresented in both houses of parliament: this age group currently accounts for about 15% of the entire UK population, but there are currently only 17 MPs who fall into this age category (just under 3% of the total).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, children and teenagers did occasionally become members of the House of Lords before 1997, when it still contained large numbers of hereditary peers, because they could inherit a seat from their relatives at any age. However, in practice they didn't take up their seats until they reached maturity.

<sup>11</sup> This figure excludes 36 MPs who were elected at the 2019 general election whose dates of birth are not publicly available, so the actual total may be slightly higher.



There are currently no members of the House of Lords who fall into this age group either.

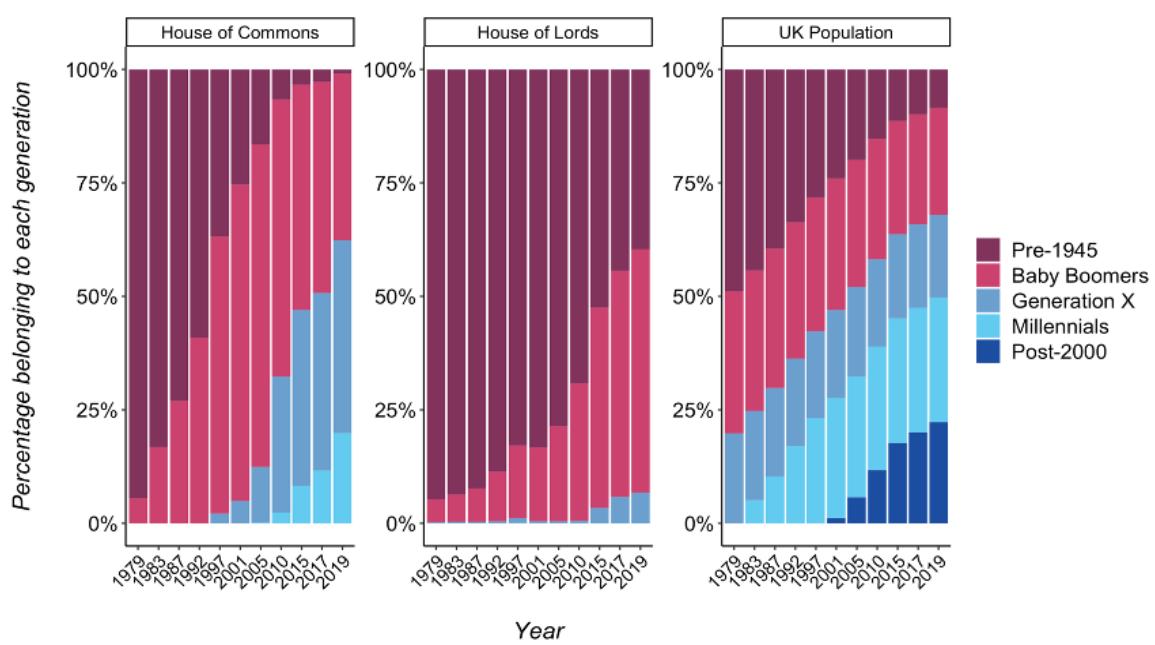
Secondly, the House of Commons has always been dominated by people who are middle-aged throughout this period: almost 70% of current MPs are aged between 40 and 59, whereas this age group accounts for about 26% of the UK population, and this pattern appears to have remained very stable over time.

Thirdly, the extent to which the House of Lords is dominated by older age groups has increased over time: the percentage of Lords who were aged 60 and above has gone from about 50% in 1979 to 86% currently, whereas this age group accounts for about 24% of the UK population.

It's also useful to look at how these three groups break down by generation, because that tells us something else about the age profile of national politicians in the UK.



### How well do UK politicians represent different generations in the UK?



Source: ONS mid-year UK population estimates and House of Commons Library  
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**Fig.3 MPs, Lords and the UK population broken down by generation, 1979-2019**

Fig.3 suggests that there is a pattern that governs which generations are in the ascendancy within the House of Commons at any given point in time. As the majority of MPs have consistently been aged between 40 and 59, the House of Commons' membership tends to be dominated by the members of whichever generation falls into that age category at each election. This means that both the Pre-1945 generation and the Baby Boomers have gone from being underrepresented in the House of Commons when these generations were younger, to being overrepresented during the period when the majority of their members were middle-aged, before their share of MPs then started to decline again in relation to their share of the population.



This can be seen most clearly from looking at the Pre-1945 generation, which went from being heavily overrepresented after the 1979 election (they made up 95% of MPs compared with 49% of the overall population at that point in time) to being underrepresented following the 2019 one (about 9% of the UK population currently belongs to this generation, compared to less than 1% of MPs).

This pattern also explains why it appears that Baby Boomer MPs (born 1945 to 1964) are now being steadily replaced by the members of Generation X (born 1965 to 1979), while the share of Millennial MPs has been growing from a very low base (there were 80 Millennial MPs following the 2019 general election compared to only 1 who was elected at the 2005 one). The share of MPs who were Baby Boomers seems to have peaked after the 2005 general election at 71%, which would have been when the members of this generation were almost exactly within the age band which tends to supply the majority of MPs: the oldest Baby Boomers would have been about 59, while the youngest ones would have been around 41.<sup>12</sup>

This is quite speculative, but if this pattern holds true then you wouldn't expect the Millennial generation to become the dominant force within the House of Commons for between another 10 or 20 years, as the oldest Millennials are only just starting to turn 40 this year. This could even be delayed if Baby Boomer MPs tend to remain as MPs for longer than members of the pre-1945 generation did, which is conceivable given that this generation is likely to enjoy longer working lives than their predecessors did generally and also because of the ageing of the UK's population, which could potentially lead to a greater preference among voters for electing more mature politicians. This would be likely to leave younger people even more underrepresented than they are now.

In contrast to the House of Commons, the House of Lords is still overwhelmingly dominated by members of the pre-1945 generation and the Baby Boomers, with very few Lords who belong to Generation X, and no Millennial members. The main reason for this is that members of the House of Lords tend to be relatively old when they first become Lords, as being given a peerage is usually a reward for either lengthy political service as an MP or distinguishing yourself in a field outside politics, combined with the facts that peerages are usually for life and life expectancy has generally been rising in the UK over recent decades.

Given the relatively limited powers which Lords actually have to affect political decision-making, it's questionable how problematic this is; it seems unlikely that younger people who aspire to a career in politics would actually want to go into the Lords as it is currently constituted, as it wouldn't provide a career path which could lead to higher political office. However, clearly its unrepresentativeness could be viewed as an argument in favour of much wider reforms to the UK's upper house, such as making it directly elected.

While looking at the age profile of the UK's legislature is important, it is of course the government which actually takes most of the major decisions on policy matters. Therefore, it could be argued that the age profile of the Cabinet tells us more about the extent to which the UK's key political decision-makers are actually representative of the population of the UK.

Fig.4 attempts to depict the age profile of UK Cabinet ministers following each general election between 1979 and 2020 (the most recent data point was 2020 in order to be up-to-date with Boris Johnson's February 2020 Cabinet reshuffle).

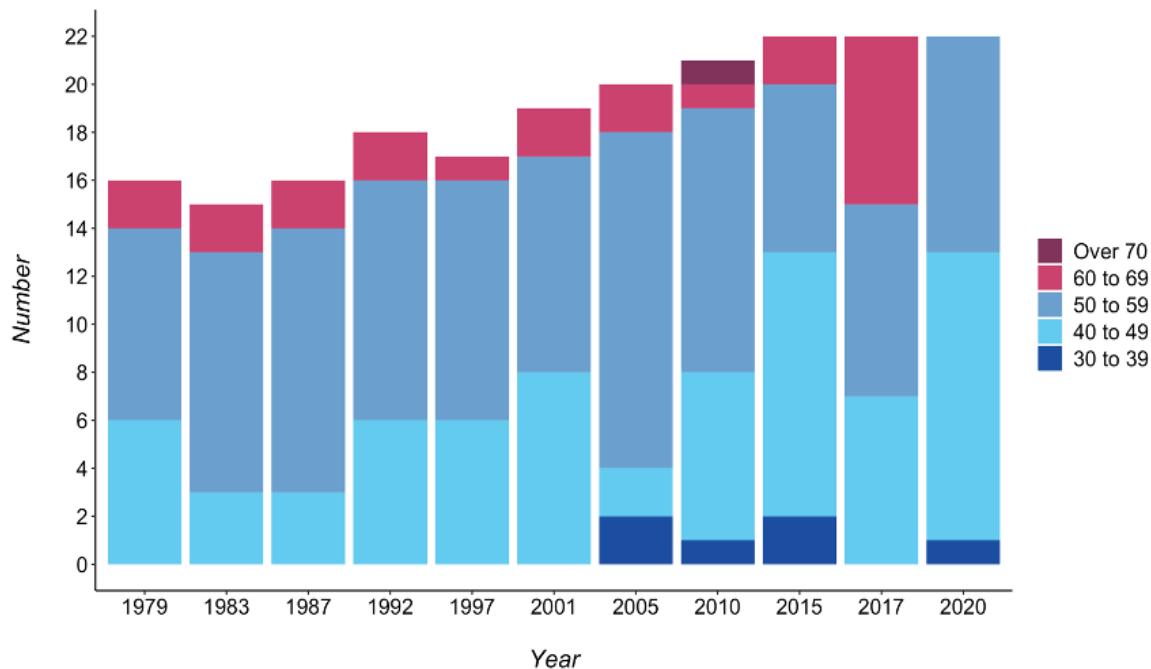
<sup>12</sup> The reason why the peak share of Baby Boomer MPs was so much lower than the peak share of Pre-1945 MPs (95% vs 71%) is presumably because the Pre-1945 generation was much larger, owing to its lack of a definitive start date.



As ministerial resignations and Cabinet reshuffles happen fairly frequently, the membership of Cabinet is quite volatile, and the fact that there are only ever around 22 Cabinet ministers means that one or two changes can have a significant impact on the average age of the Cabinet as a whole.



**UK cabinet ministers by age group**

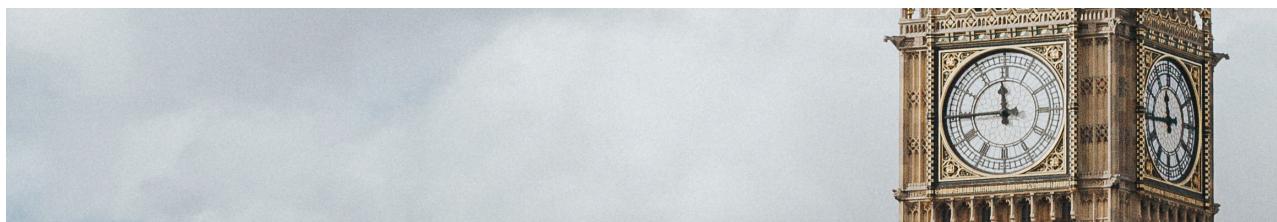


Source: ONS mid-year UK population estimates and House of Commons Library  
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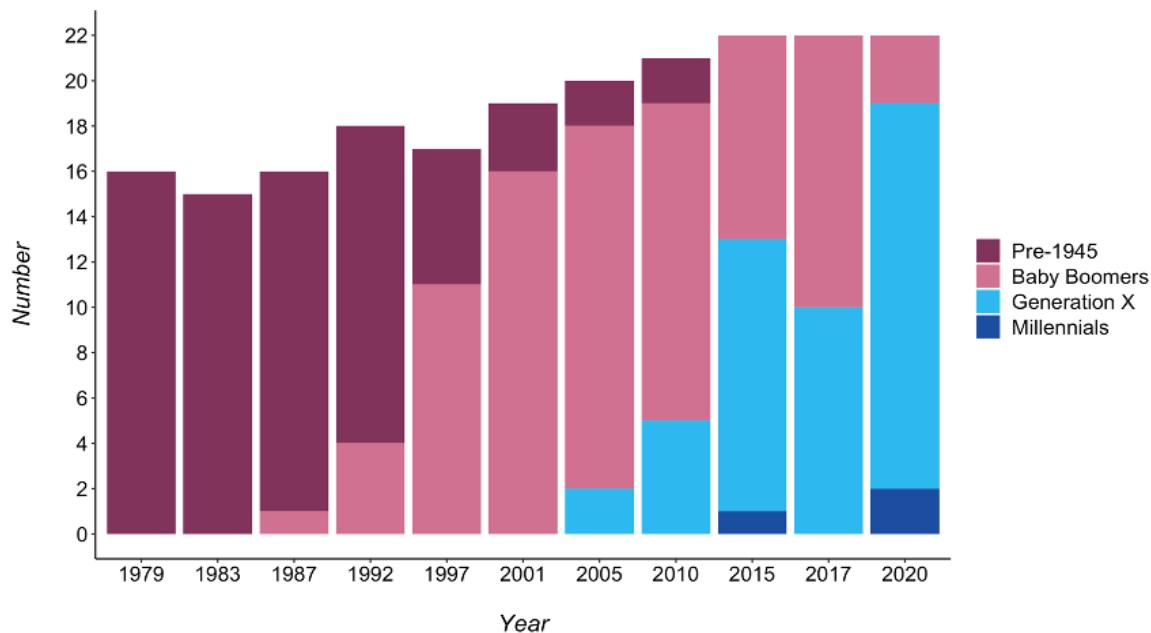
**Fig.4 UK Cabinet ministers by age group**

However, Fig.4 does contain a couple of significant points. As you would expect given that most Cabinet ministers are MPs, the majority of them tend to be aged between 40 and 59. However, the data do suggest that more recent cabinets have tended to include a higher proportion of younger ministers. For example, the Cabinet which was formed following the 2015 general election and the current one appear to be the only two in recent history (and possibly ever) where the majority of Cabinet ministers have been under the age of 50. Fig.4 also shows that the Cabinets which have served under both New Labour and the post-2010 Conservative governments have tended to include at least one or two ministers who were under the age of 40, which hadn't tended to happen previously. Cabinet ministers who are under the age of 30 have been extremely rare throughout this period.

If we look at which generations Cabinet ministers have belonged to over time then a similar pattern emerges to the one identified in the previous section where we looked at MPs:



**UK cabinet ministers by generation**



Source: ONS mid-year UK population estimates and House of Commons Library  
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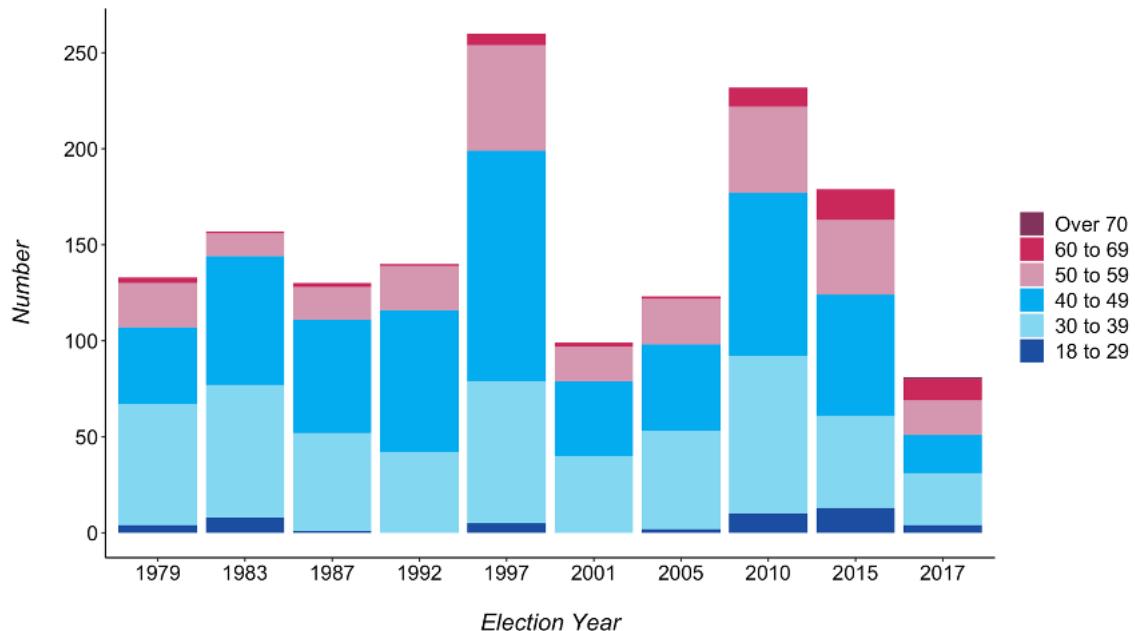
**Fig.5 UK Cabinet ministers by generation**

We can see here that since 1979 the UK's cabinets have changed from being dominated by members of the Pre-1945 generation, to being dominated by Baby Boomers and are now being dominated by members of Generation X. As of 2020, there have still only been a very small number of Cabinet ministers who are Millennials, and the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak MP, is the first Millennial to hold one of the great Offices of State.

Examining the age breakdown of newly-elected MPs at recent UK general elections also tells us something interesting about the representation of different age groups. Looking at the data in Fig.6, you can observe that newly-elected MPs (i.e. MPs who hadn't served in the previous parliament) have generally tended to be younger than MPs are as a whole: the bulk of them are usually aged between 30 and 49, whereas the majority of MPs are usually aged between 40 and 59. However, it's also worth noting that a sizable number of newly-elected MPs at recent general elections have tended to be aged over 50: in fact, at every general election since 1979 there have been more newly-elected MPs who were aged over 50 than there have been who were aged 18 to 29, and at recent general elections the number of new MPs who were aged 18 to 29 has been smaller than the number who were over 60.



**Newly elected MPs by age group at recent UK general elections**



Source: House of Commons Library  
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**Fig.6 Newly elected MPs by age following recent UK general elections (up to 2017)**

At each general election, there tends to be a proportion of newly-elected MPs who have previously served as an MP, which helps to explain why a certain proportion of them are relatively mature, but the key point which these data drive home is that, statistically, it has clearly always been difficult for young adults to get elected to parliament, and it appears that this has not been getting any easier over time.

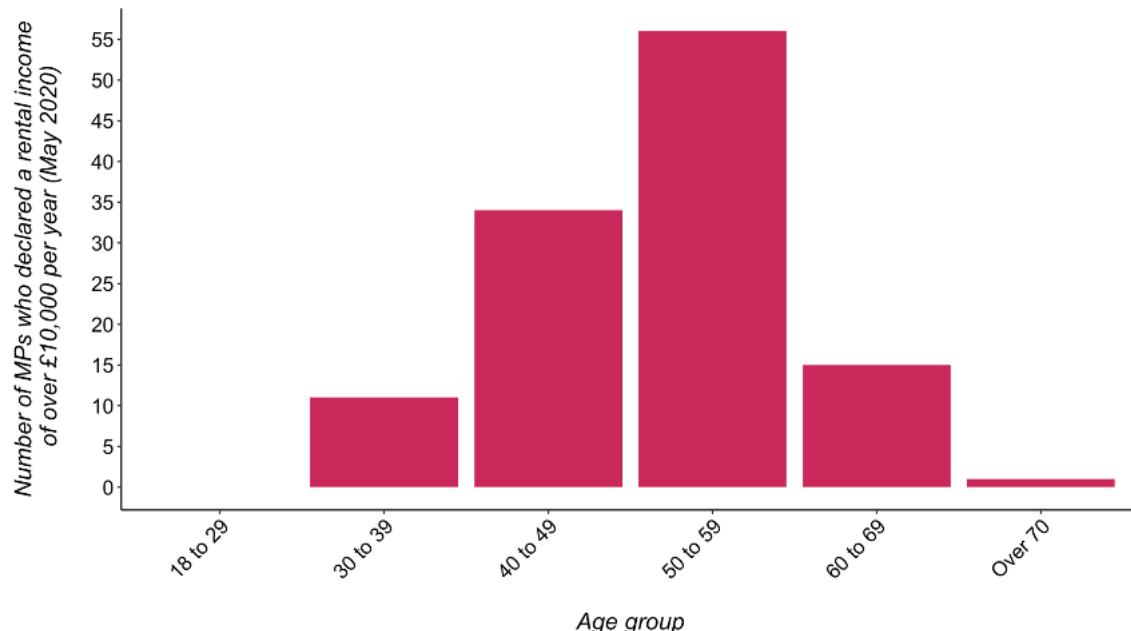
Now that we've established that young people are clearly underrepresented among the UK's political class, two important questions which need to be asked are how much this situation disadvantages younger people, and whether it is inevitable that politics underrepresents them.

Regarding the first question, a point we made near the beginning of this report was that today's generation of young adults are far less likely to own their own homes than was the case when previous generations were at the same stage in life, and far more likely to be living in the private rented sector. Housing has become a key political issue for younger people in particular, and it seems likely that fixing the UK's housing crisis would enjoy a higher political profile if there were more MPs who had direct experience of being disadvantaged it.

By contrast, based on IF's analysis of the current Register of Members' Interests, it appears that a large number of older MPs are actually landlords, meaning they are likely to have a vested interest in maintaining high house prices:



### How many MPs in each age group are landlords?



Source: IF analysis of the House of Commons Register of Members' Financial Interests (as at 26 May 2020)  
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**Fig.7 Number of MPs who have declared at least one interest in a property which generates at least £10,000 per year in rental income on the Register of Members' Interests (as at 26 May 2020)**

MPs are currently required to register any financial interests they have in properties which generate at least £10,000 per year in rental income. These won't all be residential properties (it will include holiday lets, for example), but the way in which the information is provided makes it difficult to analyse them in more precise detail. Overall, 118 MPs (18% of the total) currently fall into this category. As Fig.7 demonstrates, the likelihood of an MP being a landlord increases with age: 91% of these MPs are over 40 and nearly two-thirds are over the age of 50.

Housing is not the only area where it could be argued that it would potentially improve the quality of policy-making if there were more young MPs who could bring their knowledge, attitudes and experiences to bear on policy debates. Having grown up during a time of momentous technological shifts, MPs who are in their 20s and 30s would have a lot to contribute to debates on subjects such as technology, social media regulation and fake news. Given the shifts which have occurred in the UK's labour market over the past few decades, younger MPs would be more likely to have direct personal experience of working on zero-hours contracts or in Britain's "gig economy" than older MPs do.

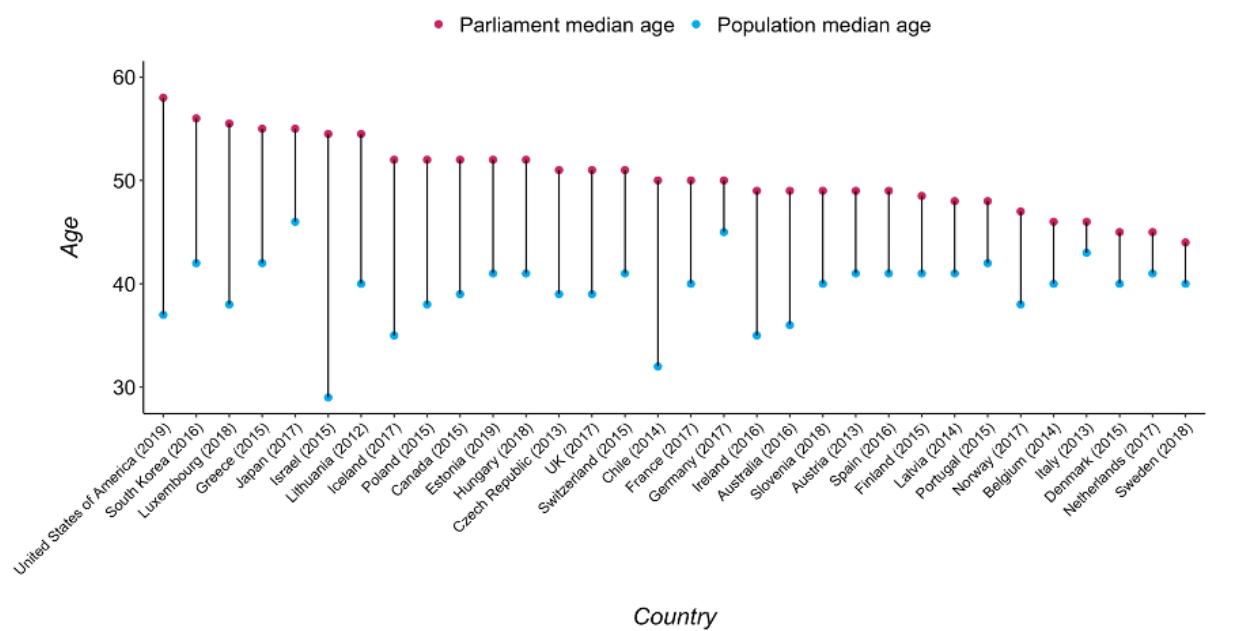
And it seems reasonable to suggest that debates about education policy would be enhanced by the presence of more MPs who had recently had direct experience of passing through school and further or higher education.



In order to help us answer the second question (whether it is inevitable that politics underrepresents younger people), we can do two things. Firstly, we can look at the situation in other developed countries to see how representative their national parliaments are. Secondly, we can also look at how the representativeness of the UK parliament has changed over time with regard to other aspects of inclusivity, such as gender and ethnicity, to see whether it could be possible to make parliament more representative with regard to age if this issue was accorded a higher priority.



### How does the age of politicians compare to the general population around the world?



Source: EveryPolitician and UN World Population Prospects 2019  
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**Fig.8 Median age of parliamentarians compared to the general population in OECD countries**

The existence of a unique online database called EveryPolitician means that we can make some international comparisons which look at how representative politicians are of the people who elect them in terms of age in many different countries around the world. EveryPolitician existed to catalogue the identities of all the politicians who were elected to parliament at each national election, including their names and dates of birth, and eventually grew to include data from 233 different countries until the project was paused in 2019. We took data from the most recent national election that EveryPolitician held data for in 32 OECD member states, including the UK, and compared these with data on the population age structure in the election year which had been sourced from the UN's World Population Prospects 2019 dataset (this provided population estimates by single year of age and sex for every country in each year between 1950 and 2019).

Fig.8 displays the median age of parliamentarians who were elected to the lower house of parliament in their country following the most recent election which EveryPolitician held data for, compared with the median age of the population in the election year from the UN data and ordered by the median age of the parliamentarians; the vertical lines represent the gap (in years) between the two median ages.

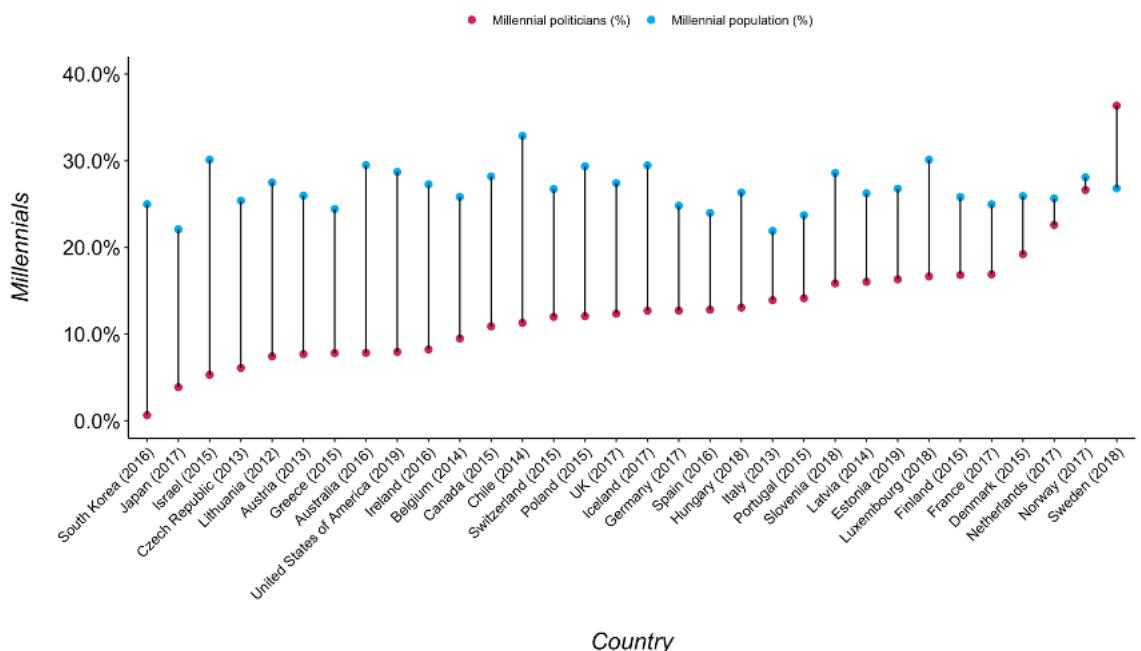


These data tell us several important things. Firstly, the median age of politicians varies a lot between different OECD countries, from 58 in the US House of Representatives (following the 2019 House elections) to 44 in the Swedish parliament (following the 2018 Swedish general election). Secondly, the size of the age gap varies a lot too: although the US has the oldest politicians, the country with the largest age gap is actually Israel (25.5 years), followed by the US, Chile, Luxembourg and Iceland. Thirdly, it appears that the size of the age gap tends to reduce as the median age of politicians decreases; in other words, there is some degree of correlation between the median age of politicians and the median age of the population, although this relationship is broken in the countries that have the most extreme gaps.

Where does the UK fit into this picture? The UK has an age gap of 12 years (based on the outcome of the 2017 general election, as the 2019 one happened after EveryPolitician had ceased archiving new data); this was the 14th largest gap out of the 32 countries being compared, so it's close to the middle of the distribution. Obviously, while this means that almost half of OECD countries have a bigger age gap than the UK, it also means that about half of them have parliamentarians who are more representative of the national population in terms of age than the UK parliament is. The countries which have a smaller age gap than the UK does include a number of our closest European neighbours, such as Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and Belgium, which suggests that the UK could have something to learn from how those countries are able to achieve a blend of different ages within parliament which is more representative of the wider population than is the case in the UK.



### How underrepresented are Millennials in parliaments around the world?



Source: EveryPolitician and UN World Population Prospects 2019  
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**Fig.9 Proportion of Millennials among parliamentarians compared to the general population in OECD countries**



However, while the comparison described above is interesting, it doesn't necessarily tell us how well these countries do at representing younger people within their parliaments, which is the main focus of this research. Several of the countries listed above which only had a small gap between the median age of the population and the median age of politicians had particularly high median ages among both groups, such as Italy and Germany, so it could be that those countries still don't actually have many younger politicians.

Fig.9 is similar to Fig.8, except that instead of comparing the median age among the general population with the median age among parliamentarians, it compares the proportion of the population which belongs to the Millennial generation with the proportion of parliamentarians who are Millennials. The length of the vertical lines represent the extent to which Millennials are underrepresented in national parliaments in comparison to their share of the population.

We saw earlier that Millennials are underrepresented among parliamentarians in the UK, and Fig.8 places this in an international context by showing that Millennials are underrepresented in every OECD country for which we had data - with the exception of Sweden, where they are actually overrepresented. Fig.9 also clearly demonstrates that there are some OECD countries in which Millennials are much better represented than they are in others: although Sweden is an outlier, the share of Millennials among politicians is very close to its share among the general population in Norway (26%) and the Netherlands (28%), whereas they are very underrepresented in South Korea, Japan, Israel and the Czech Republic.

As with the previous comparison, the UK is firmly in the middle of the pack: following the 2017 general election, just 12% of MPs were Millennials, in comparison to 27% of the population. Once again, while the UK is far from the worst OECD country on this measure, these results do also mean that there are a number of (mostly European) OECD states which are currently doing a better job of enabling members of the Millennial generation to enter national politics. It would be useful to see whether there are features of the political systems which are used in Sweden, Norway or the Netherlands in particular which have made it easier for younger politicians to get elected.

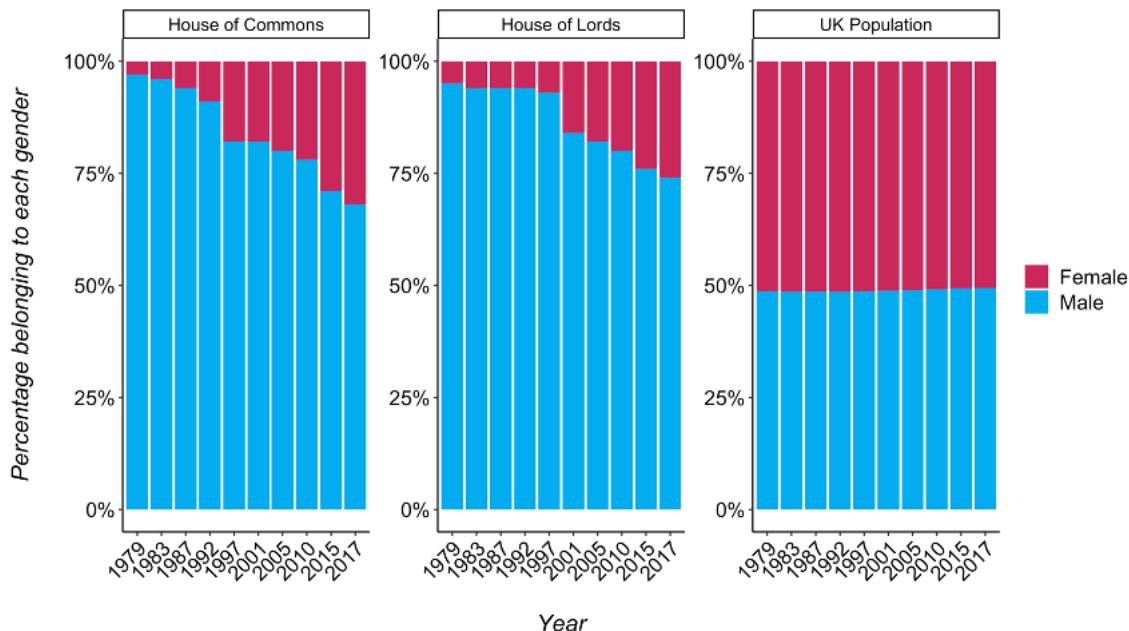
The other useful comparison which we can make is to examine how much more inclusive the UK's parliament has become with regard to representing other groups which have historically been underrepresented over time. The most straightforward point of comparison is with gender: Fig.10 demonstrates that women have always been underrepresented in both of the UK's houses of parliament in comparison to their share of the total population, but it is also true that both houses of parliament have become much more inclusive with regard to gender over recent decades. When Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister in 1979, she was one of only 19 female MPs; by contrast, the parliament which contained Theresa May's government following the 2017 general election had 208. Another way of looking at this is to say that female MPs went from 3% to 32% of the total during this period. Clearly, there is still a long way to go before true gender equality is achieved in politics - and the very poor treatment which female politicians too often receive from certain sections of the media and online may be deterring would-be female MPs from entering politics - but good progress in increasing female representation has been made over the past few decades.

Making comparisons with other underrepresented groups is trickier because there is generally less historical data available on subjects such as ethnicity or sexuality. However, the data which we do have suggest that there have been some quite significant improvements in the representativeness of parliament when you look at a number of other aspects of inclusivity. To reiterate from above, the proportion of MPs who come from a BAME background has grown from under 1% in 1987 to almost 10% in 2019, which is approaching the 15% of the UK population that is believed to come from BAME backgrounds on the basis of the 2011 census.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. Barton, C. et al.



### How much has the gender balance among UK politicians changed over time?



Source: ONS mid-year UK population estimates and House of Commons Library  
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**Fig.10 Gender balance in the UK Houses of Parliament and UK population over time**

While there are no official data on the sexuality of the UK's politicians, the House of Commons Library has also quoted reports by the newspaper PinkNews that there were 46 openly LGBT+ MPs serving in parliament following the 2019 general election, which would equate to 7% of the total. The ONS currently publishes experimental statistics that attempt to break down the UK's population by sexual orientation using data from the Annual Population Survey which suggest that 2.2% of adults in the UK self-identified as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual in 2018, while 4.7% said they didn't identify as heterosexual.<sup>14</sup> Although there are caveats surrounding both sets of data, this comparison does suggest that the LGBT+ community may not be underrepresented within the UK parliament in a purely statistical sense.

The purpose of these comparisons is not to make it sound as though younger people being underrepresented is a greater social injustice than members of any other group being underrepresented, or to present inclusivity as a competition. Instead, the purpose of these statistical comparisons is to highlight the fact that certain other underrepresented groups have enjoyed much bigger improvements in representation than young people have over the past few decades, and much of this is down to the political parties deliberately prioritising inclusivity. The progress which has been achieved on gender diversity is probably the outstanding example of this approach: famously, Tony Blair's Labour victory in 1997 led to a doubling of the number of female MPs who were elected to parliament compared with the previous general election in 1992 (the so-called "Blair's Babes"), from 60 to 120, which happened because the Labour Party had decided to deliberately prioritise getting more women elected to parliament, including using tactics such as all-female candidate shortlists.

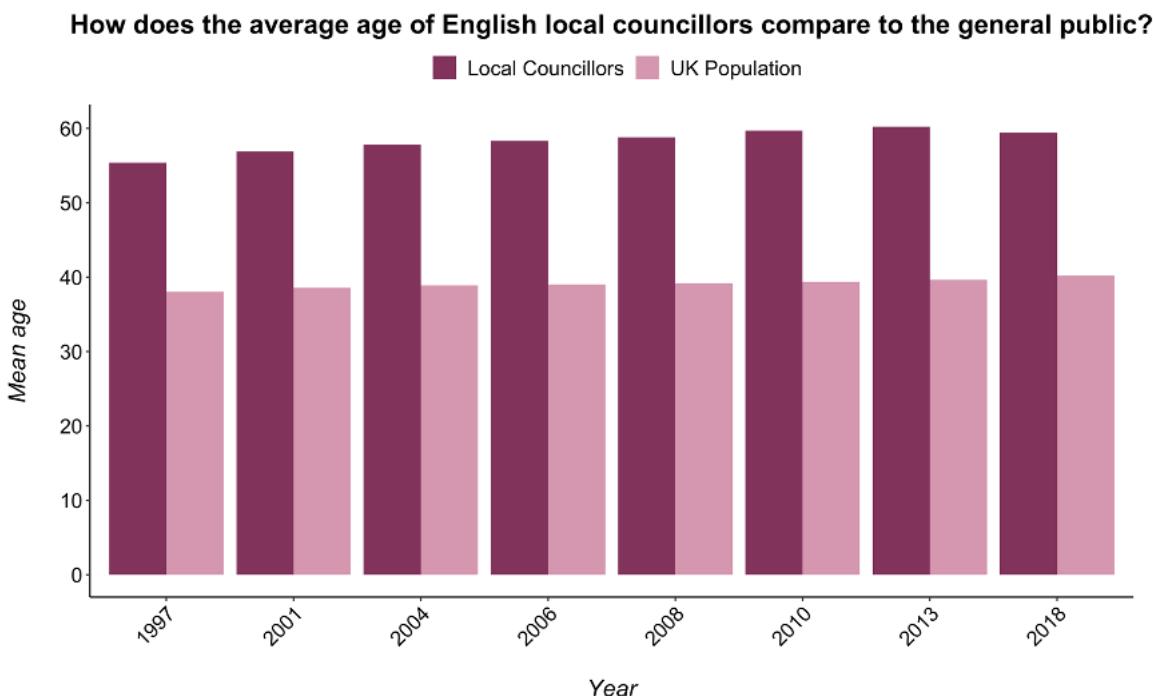
<sup>14</sup> ONS (2020) Sexual orientation, UK: 2018, Newport: ONS



The key point here is that it would be possible for UK political parties to elect larger numbers of young MPs if they were made it a priority, for example by making greater efforts to identify younger party activists who could have the potential to become MPs and helping to prepare them for office, and/or the parties tactically standing younger election candidates in their safer seats. In the UK system, political parties exert a great deal of control over choosing which candidates end up standing for parliament, so unless they deliberately seek to increase the age diversity of parliament it seems unlikely that any significant progress will occur.

### 3b. How representative is the age profile of local government politicians in England?

In addition to analysing the representativeness of national politicians in the UK in terms of age, we can also look at the age profile of local politicians in England using data from the Local Government Association, which has undertaken eight censuses of English local councillors since 1997. This was the subject of the research paper which IF published in 2012 that was referred to in this report's introduction.



Source: ONS and LGA  
© Intergenerational Foundation 2020 [www.if.org.uk](http://www.if.org.uk)

**Fig.11 Mean age of English local councillors compared to the UK population over time**

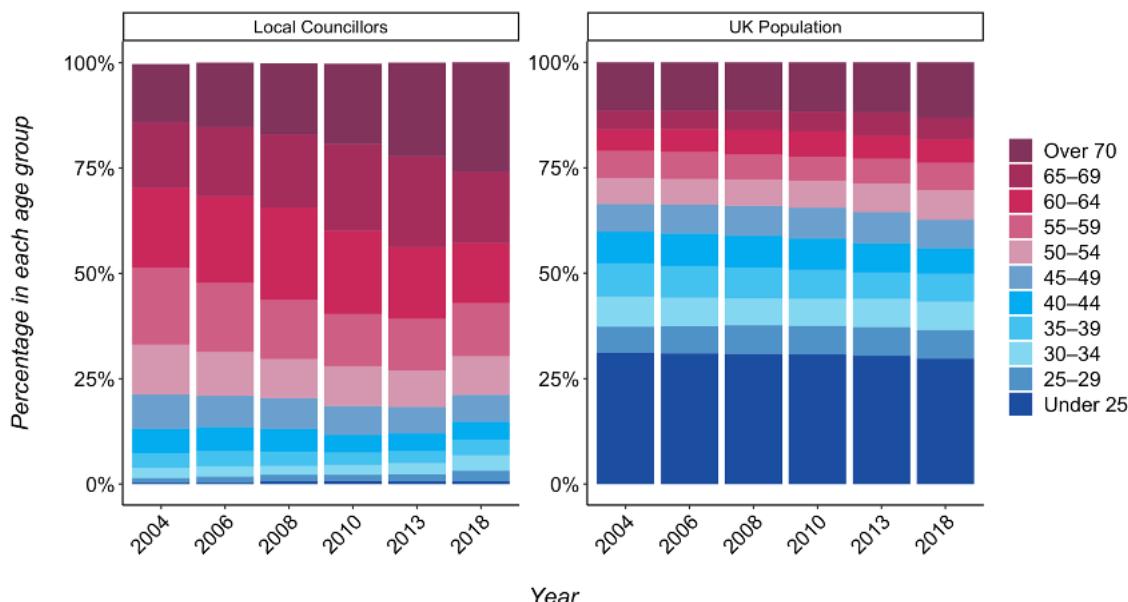
Fig.11 indicates that the average age of local councillors in England and Wales is much higher than that among the UK population, and it was steadily increasing in small increments between the first LGA census in 1997 and the one in 2013, since when it has slightly reduced. In 1997, the average local councillor was aged 54, but this had risen to 60 by 2013, before falling to 59 in 2018.



The gap between the average age of local councillors and the average age of the UK population has also grown during the same time period, from 17 years in 1997 to 19 years in 2018. We can also compare local councillors to parliamentarians using the data from the previous section: this suggests that the average age among local councillors is nearly ten years higher than among MPs (59 vs 51), but it is also about ten years younger than the average among members of the House of Lords (59 vs 71).



### How do the age groups which English local councillors belong to compare to the UK population?



Source: ONS and LGA  
 © Intergenerational Foundation 2020 [www.if.org.uk](http://www.if.org.uk)

**Fig.12 English local councillors and the UK population broken down by age group over time**

Digging into the age breakdown of local councillors in greater depth, we can see in Fig.11 that the oldest age groups have historically been overrepresented among local councillors, while conversely younger people have been severely underrepresented. In 2018, 79% of local councillors were over the age of 50, and 57% were above the age of 60, compared to 37% and 24% of the UK population respectively. Meanwhile, only about 3% of local councillors were under the age of 30 and less than 10% were under the age of 40.

The LGA data also provided other evidence to suggest that the people who become local councillors are not statistically representative of the general population of the UK: in the data from 2018, 63% of councillors were male, 96% described their ethnic background as white, and 68% held a degree or equivalent educational qualification (compared to around 40% of the UK population).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> LGA (2019) National census of local authority councillors 2018. London: LGA



The picture painted of people who become local councillors is that they are overwhelmingly older middle-class white men, and that local councillors are significantly less representative of the wider UK population than any other level of elected representatives.

We argued in our previous research into this issue that this was problematic for several reasons. Local councillors have significant powers to influence political decision-making in local areas, especially when it comes to granting planning permissions. The UK's pronounced age divide with regard to home-ownership means that the economic interests of young people who want more affordable housing to be built where they live and older councillors who are already property-owners may come into conflict when planning decisions are being taken.

There is also an argument that it is undesirable for local democracy to be dominated by such an unrepresentative section of society, given that it could result in the marginalisation of the issues and concerns that underrepresented groups are facing. It is also likely to give young people the impression that becoming a local councillor isn't for people like them if very few councillors belong to their age group; this could contribute to them being disengaged from local politics in general if they feel that it isn't an arena in which they are able to make their voices heard.

Why don't more young people get elected as local councillors? In our previous research we identified a number of specific barriers which serve to prevent younger people from participating in local democracy by serving as councillors, based on a series of interviews that we conducted in 2012 with younger people who were either serving as local councillors at that time or had done so in the recent past. These interviews suggested that the following factors were all important deterrents which prevented younger people from becoming elected:

- Being a local councillor is unpaid (allowance and expenses are permitted), making it much easier to become a councillor if having a guaranteed source of income, such as a pension, rather than having to fit responsibilities in around work and family life. One young councillor we spoke to had received only a basic allowance of £5,500 p.a. before tax. This is in return for a very demanding workload, as councillors spend an average of 22.5 hours a week performing their duties, which often includes frequent evening meetings and around-the-clock availability for dealing with their constituents' problems
- A bias on the part of party managers, who were more likely to view younger candidates as an electoral risk.
- Many councils have rules which state that people who want to stand for election need to have lived or worked in the local area for at least 12 months, which disproportionately bars younger candidates from standing because they are more geographically mobile than older people.
- Elected local councillors are expected to live in the area where they've been elected for the whole of their four year term, which can also disadvantage younger candidates who might need to move for work or family reasons.
- Older people are generally much more likely to vote in local elections than younger people are, which can incentivise parties to choose older candidates because they think voters will prefer to elect people who have a greater resemblance to themselves.
- The confrontational nature of political debate in local government, which can result in some quite personal insults being thrown during debates, including examples of younger councillors being attacked on the basis of their age and perceived inexperience.



Although these interviews were undertaken eight years ago, there have been few changes to the ways in which English local democracy works during the interim, and the data we've presented show that local councillors are even less representative now than they were then. Our findings strongly suggest that the problems that we identified in 2012 still remain significant barriers to younger people getting elected as local councillors in England today.



## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The evidence which we've presented in this report has clearly demonstrated three things: firstly, that, in terms of age, younger people are underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making in the UK; secondly, that this underrepresentation has improved very little over time; and thirdly, although younger people are underrepresented among political decision-makers in most OECD countries, many of these countries seem to be doing a better job of enabling younger people to become elected representatives than is the case in the UK.

Given the remarkable progress which has been made over recent decades when it comes to increasing the number of elected representatives who belong to previously underrepresented groups, including women, people from BAME backgrounds and the LGBT community, there is clearly no reason why this situation should be viewed as an inevitability.

Additionally, it can be argued that this underrepresentation undermines the democratic legitimacy of our political institutions, disengages younger people from politics and contributes to the neglect of socio-economic problems which disproportionately affect younger people.

IF would like to propose the following recommendations to ameliorate the underrepresentation of younger people among political decision-makers:

- Political parties should make greater efforts to recruit and develop the profiles of younger activists in order to increase the likelihood of them being chosen as parliamentary candidates, and they should aim to increase the proportion of their MPs who belong to younger age groups to make them more representative of the wider UK population.
- Local councils should hold awareness campaigns to encourage young people to stand for election as local councillors. Beyond that, the option of having quotas for representatives below the age of 30 should be examined as a viable means of encouraging more youthful participation, potentially accompanied by measures designed to overcome the systematic barriers which prevent underrepresented groups from getting elected, such as providing more generous levels of means-tested financial support.
- Local councils should investigate, and try to address, the systematic barriers which make it more difficult for younger people to serve as councillors. This may include measures such as ensuring that council meetings are not scheduled to take place during the working day, when it is likely that younger councillors would need to be at work, and looking at ways that councillors could be given more support to help them achieve the difficult balancing-act between their lives as public servants and their domestic responsibilities.
- Every type of political body in the UK, from town and parish councils to Parliament, should be required to collect and publish more detailed data on the personal characteristics of their elected members, including breakdowns by age. These data should be compiled and archived in a user-friendly format and made publicly available online, to encourage greater scrutiny about the representativeness of the UK's political decision-makers.



## Appendix 1 - Methodology

This project involved assembling and blending data from a wide variety of different data sources, each of which came with certain limitations and caveats. These are discussed in more detail below:

### 1) Parliamentary Data Platform Members API

All data on the current and previous age composition of both the House of Lords and the House of Commons was retrieved using a series of requests which were submitted to the Parliamentary Data Platform Members API, which requested the full composition of both houses of parliament on the date immediately following each UK general election since 1979.

Unfortunately, there were some limitations to using this method. With the data for MPs, there were 36 MPs elected at the 2019 general election for whom we could not find dates of birth from any published source; as a result, the figures which are provided for the numbers of MPs who belong to different generations and age groups are likely to be an undercount. When it came to the House of Lords, the dataset provided through the API did not contain data for Lords who first took up their seats after 2018, so some members of the House of Lords will be missing from the figures published in this report.

As this data included the members' dates of birth, these were then used to derive both the age of each member at each point in time and the generation which they belonged to. Membership of different generations was based on the following classification: Pre-1945 - everyone born in years up to and including 1945; Baby Boomer - everyone born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X - everyone born between 1964 and 1980; Millennials - everyone born between 1980 and 2000; and Post-2000 - everyone born in the year 2000 and beyond.

Data for the average ages of new MPs at each UK general election since 1979 were also retrieved from this source, although this required the additional step of working out which members who were in office following each election had not been serving in the previous parliament. All MPs who had not belonged to the previous parliament were assumed to be new MPs, although this will include some politicians who had served as an MP previously, but who hadn't been in office during the previous parliament.

Additionally, data on the average ages of cabinet ministers were also retrieved from this source, which involved the additional step of working out which MPs had been attending cabinet during previous parliaments. This process was slightly more complicated than the other ones described above: two separate datasets were retrieved from the API, one which recorded government roles on a series of fixed points in time and one which recorded the membership of both houses of parliament at the same points in time, with the time points always being either the first of October in the year immediately following each general election since 1979 or the date of the most recent government reshuffle, which took place on 14 February 2020 (this was chosen to get around the problem that the 2019 general election occurred after the 1 October).

The date of 1 October was chosen because it fell several months after the date of every election between 1979 and 2017, which meant that all of the available cabinet roles were likely to have been filled by that point. These datasets were then cross-referenced to identify the MPs who held government roles at these points in time, and then filtered to select only the ones who held cabinet positions. This involved filtering out all of the ministerial positions which are not cabinet roles, which is the majority of them because of the number of junior ministers, whips and so on who are part of the government but do not attend cabinet.



## 2) House of Commons Register of Members' Financial Interests

The data which were presented within the report on our analysis of the Register of Members' Financial Interests was based on analysing the Register as it stood on 26 May 2020. The Register itself is available from the [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) website:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmregmem/200526/contents.htm>

Under Section 6 of the register, MPs are currently required to declare any property interests which either i) have a value of over £100,000 or ii) yield a rental income of over £10,000 per year. For the purposes of this analysis, all MPs who declared a property interest which met the second of these two criteria were classified as landlords.

## 3) ONS Population Estimates

The age distribution of the UK population at the chosen points in time was estimated using the ONS mid-year annual population estimates by single year of age. More information about how these estimates were calculated can be found on the ONS website:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

## 4) EveryPolitician

The data which were presented on the age profile of elected politicians in different OECD countries were based on data that were archived as part of the EveryPolitician project. The EveryPolitician project was an attempt to create a single, consistently-formatted online repository of basic information about every elected politician on earth. Although the project was paused in mid-2019, the data which they collected are still accessible online. More details about EveryPolitician can be found on the project's website:

<https://everypolitician.org/>

In order to make the comparisons included in this report, data were retrieved for the most recent national election in every OECD country. Some countries have two elected houses of parliament, in which case data for the lower house were used, while others only have a single legislative chamber. These data included dates of birth for the vast majority of politicians from every country, which meant it was straightforward to calculate their ages and which generation they belonged to using the same procedure that was described above for the UK data. Three OECD countries were excluded from this analysis (Mexico, New Zealand and Turkey) because their datasets from EveryPolitician contained a large amount of missing data.

## 5) UN Population Prospects

The age distribution of the populations of the OECD countries which were compared in this report were estimated using the UN World Population Prospects 2019 population estimates by single year of age for each country in every year since 1950. More information about these estimates can be found on the World Population Prospects 2019 website:

<https://population.un.org/wpp/>



## Notes







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