

## Still Rising: The Career Politician in the British House of Commons, the Cabinet and the Shadow Cabinet

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### Abstract

*There has been a perception that politicians in Britain are increasingly detached from the electorate at large by an apparent increase in the number of 'career politicians' who have a professional background within politics itself. This article examines the occupational backgrounds of successful candidates to the House of Commons of the United Kingdom between the 1997 and 2010 general elections, making comparisons between the parliamentary compositions of the three main political parties (Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats) during this period, and in terms of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet as of 2014. By evaluating secondary and original quantitative data, it will be argued that professionalized politicians have increased in the House of Commons relative to other occupational backgrounds, and are even further disproportionately represented in the senior teams of each major party.*

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**Keywords:** Career politician, professionalization, occupational representation

3,093 words

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Swiss Centre of Expertise of the Social Sciences for granting access to the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS), as well as to [name deleted] of [university name deleted] for very helpful suggestions on sources of quantitative data. Thanks are also due to [name deleted] of [university name deleted] for supervising the project. Any errors are the author's own.

“I have climbed to the top of the greasy pole.”

*Benjamin Disraeli, on becoming Prime Minister in 1868*  
(cited in Dale, 2013: 132)

## 1. Introduction

Politics has long been perceived as a game between competing insiders, as illustrated by the above quote from Disraeli. What appears to be different today is the occupational background of politicians, particularly frontbenchers. Disraeli had prior experience as an author, but there is a perception that more and more Members of Parliament (MPs) have pre-parliamentary experience in professional politics itself. An emergent ‘career politician’ in Britain was articulated in the early 1980s by Andrew King, who observed that “increasingly ... politicians without a great deal of first-hand experience of the world outside politics are running the country” (King, 1981: 278). This was echoed by Riddell (1993), who argued that MPs are decreasingly associated with having experience of ‘proper jobs’. Instead, he pointed to “a marked rise in the number of MPs working in jobs directly linked to politics” (Riddell, 1993: 118).

This article tests the theory of the continued rise of the career politician, defined as someone with a pre-parliamentary occupational background in professional politics, such as research for a political party or as a parliamentary aide,<sup>1</sup> against secondary and original quantitative data. By looking at the changing number of career politicians in the House of Commons since 1997, the success rates of career politicians as candidates since 1997, and the contemporary occupational composition of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet, it will be argued that career politicians are increasingly dominant in British political life, particularly in the Labour Party. This empirical finding highlights normative issues for representative democracy to which parties themselves should respond.

## 2. The Rise of the ‘Career Politician’

The composition of legislatures has been a longstanding focus in political science. After all, a key function of Parliament is to *represent* the electorate (Kelso, 2009: 222). A contemporary concern for Parliament’s lack of representativeness has been its significant under-representation of ethnic minorities and women (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Childs, 2000; Saggar and Geddes, 2000; Philips, 2012). As such, descriptive representation is argued to be important for representation to be meaningful (Chaney and Fevre, 2002: 909). This line of reasoning posits that the demographic composition of Parliament should accurately mirror that of the wider electorate. An elitist view of

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<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as a ‘professional politician’; adapted from Criddle (2010:328).

parliamentary democracy may counter that representation should reflect policy preferences, not personal profiles. However, this view fails to consider the finding that the act of representation requires a degree of *understanding* of constituents as a prerequisite to responsiveness (Kittilson and Tate, 2005: 163). Part of this understanding can derive from representatives and constituents sharing a similar type of background. Research by Esaiasson and Holmberg (1996: 31), for example, confirms that the social background of MPs helps to determine their attitudes in office.

This raises the question of the *occupational* background of MPs: are they diverse enough to represent society at large? An MP with a background in professional politics may have a good grasp of their constituents' concerns. After all, even if an MP has a background as a builder, he or she will still have to represent the interests of retailers, lawyers and doctors. What raises concerns at the continued rise of the career politician, however, is the wider political context. Polling data generally illustrates a more or less constant state of distrust between members of the public and elected representatives. Only 21% reported trusting politicians generally in 2013, while 83% of Britons believe that MPs put either their personal or party's interest first (Ipsos-MORI, 2013). This reflects a wider sense of "disconnect" between the electorate and the elected (Allen, 2013). It is also revealing that one of the key arguments put forward in favour of retaining an appointed House of Lords is to help retain a degree of professional diversity in the chamber and avoid yet further opportunities for career politicians to enter parliament (Reid, 2012). Rife scepticism of a seemingly predominant career politician is not lost on former Prime Minister, Tony Blair (cited in Rentoul, 2013):

I advise any young person who wants to go into politics today: ... do anything that isn't politics for at least several years. And then ... you will find you are so much better able to see the world and how it functions properly.

The general implication is clear: if politicians do not have experience in occupations beyond politics itself, they will have a deficient understanding of the real world. Of course, some scholars argue that in countries such as Canada and Finland, elected representatives are not professionalized enough in the 'game' of politics, resulting in too many amateurish MPs being elected (Erickson, 1997: 33; Helander, 1997: 56). But a distinction can be made, however, between skills required for effective governance and representation, and the perception of an excessive degree of influence of any one group (Norris, 1997: 5), hence the concern of this article.

Research so far, however, has been relatively patchy when it comes to offering a systematic quantitative analysis on the proportion of career politicians over time and at different levels. Cowley (2012) examined the profiles of the three main party leaders in contrast to their predecessors. He notes

that David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband *all* can be described as ‘career politicians’,<sup>2</sup> an unprecedented development attributable to a “two-track career path,” whereby professionalized politicians have certain experiences that help accelerate their promotion (Cowley, 2012: 36). However, Cowley’s research does not consider the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet more broadly. Cairney (2007) made an innovative contribution to the area of study by highlighting broader ‘instrumental’ occupations that are a stepping-stone towards elected office, extended beyond parliamentary researchers to trade union officials and consultants in public relations (Cairney, 2007: 214). This expanded conceptual framework will be considered later within this article. Whilst Cairney found evidence for an upward trajectory in the number of MPs with ‘instrumental’ political experience, there is a need to address the continued trajectory of the career politician in parliament up to the most recent election, as well as to consider the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet in light of the normative issues that have been discussed.

### 3. Evidence & Analysis

**Table 1:** Occupational background of all successful candidates to the House of Commons, 1997-2010 (%)

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Selected Detail</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>
<i>Professions</i>	Barrister	5.7	5.2	5.5	6.0
	Solicitor	4.5	5.6	6.2	7.6
	Doctor	1.4	1.3	1.0	1.4
	Lecturers	9.7	8.4	7.2	4.0
	Teachers	10.3	10.2	7.6	3.8
		<b>43.2</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>39.3</b>	<b>34.5</b>
<i>Business</i>		<b>18.0</b>	<b>17.0</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>24.7</b>
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	Politician/organiser	9.5	10.5	14.1	14.3
	Publisher/journalist	7.5	7.9	7.0	6.0
	Union official	-	-	-	4.6
	Public relations	-	-	-	2.5
		<b>29.9</b>	<b>31.7</b>	<b>35.3</b>	<b>35.2</b>
<i>Manual</i>		<b>8.9</b>	<b>8.4</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>4.0</b>

**Source:** Butler & Kavanagh (1997; 2002; 2005), and Kavanagh & Cowley (2010). *n* =640 in 1997 and 2001; 627 in 2005; 631 in 2010. Figures only include MPs from Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats.

<sup>2</sup> Each was previously a political adviser.

This section will test the theory that career politicians are rising in relative terms. This is possible by compiling empirical data collected by Butler and Kavanagh (1997; 2001; 2005), and Kavanagh and Cowley (2010) of MPs and candidates, as well as examining original data collected by the author for the current Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet. The focus of analysis is on the ‘politician/political organiser’ occupational category used by the secondary data. It does not take long to confirm an overall trend in the increased presence of the career politician.

Table 1 presents a summary of the occupational background of the 2010 intake to the House of Commons. We can see that the politician/political organiser increases in prominence, from 9.5% of MPs in 1997 to 14.3% in 2010. This represents a 51% increase over thirteen years. Despite this general rise, the proportion coming from a background in publishing or journalism fell modestly over the last two elections. Cairney (2012) includes these as instrumental occupations to the field of politics, and Table 1 thus demonstrates that career politicians with this particular instrumental experience are not increasing in the Commons. However, what makes data from 2010 most useful is that due to a revision in occupational categories by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), data is now particularized according to backgrounds in public relations, and as union officials.<sup>3</sup> If these are included as occupational backgrounds that are instrumental to politics (as classified by Cairney, 2012: 214), then an additional 7.2% of MPs from the three main parties may be considered professionalized politicians, bringing the total to 27.9%. At just 7% short of the overall number of main-party MPs from the traditional professions, this figure is worrying in its dominance in relation to other backgrounds.

However, candidature *before* entering parliament must be considered as a level of analysis to consider a broader picture of supply (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995: 2). Crucially, candidates with professional backgrounds in politics appear to be more successful in relation to other types of candidate. Table 2 enables us to distinguish between the success rates of different occupational backgrounds; in other words, the percentage of candidates from a particular occupation winning election to Parliament. These calculations reveal that despite a surprisingly negative trend from 1997 to 2005, the politician/political organiser occupation still has a consistently higher success ratio than most other backgrounds. Nearly half of all candidates with a paid political background won a seat in the Commons, compared to less than a fifth of all teachers. Candidates who are barristers have a relatively high success rate, as do manual workers, although this rate is rising for the former and falling for the latter group.

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<sup>3</sup> It is unclear into which category these occupations were previously categorised.

**Table 2:** Success rates to the House of Commons by occupation (% ratio)

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Selected Detail</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>
<i>Professions</i>	Barrister	37.5	41.3	45.3	46.3
	Solicitor	26.2	35.7	39.6	36.6
	Doctor	34.6	27.6	24.0	27.3
	Lecturers	48.8	49.5	46.8	30.5
	Teachers	31.6	35.4	32.4	17.6
		<b>33.3</b>	<b>33.8</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>29.4</b>
<i>Business</i>		<b>20.0</b>	<b>22.1</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>32.7</b>
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	Politician/political organiser	58.8	44.0	45.1	48.1
	Publisher/journalist	46.1	46.7	45.7	36.5
	Union official	-	-	-	59.2
	Public relations	-	-	-	32.0
		<b>43.1</b>	<b>37.3</b>	<b>38.8</b>	<b>36.6</b>
<i>Manual</i>		<b>56.6</b>	<b>53.5</b>	<b>45.2</b>	<b>43.1</b>

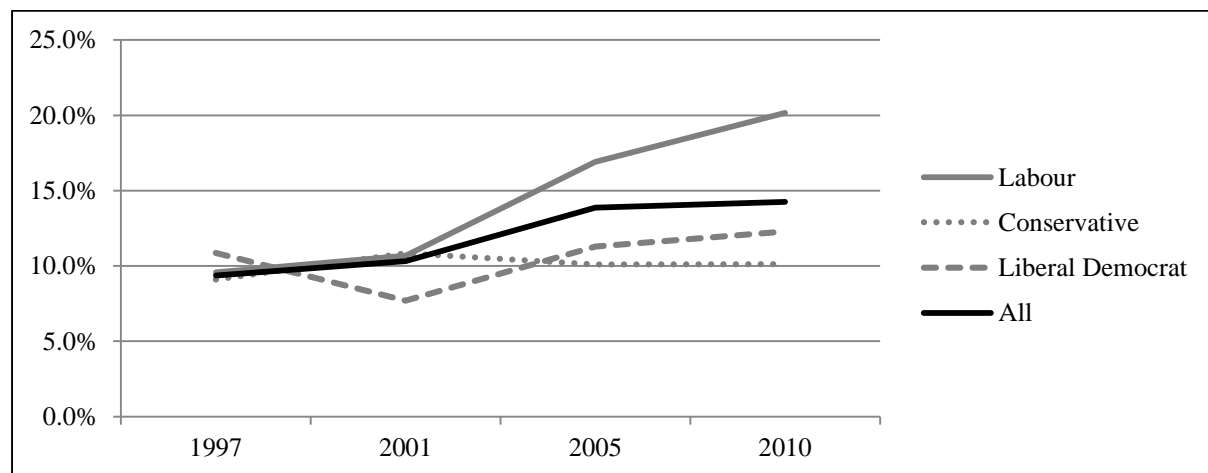
**Source:** Author's calculations, based on Butler & Kavanagh (1997; 2002; 2005) and Kavanagh & Cowley (2010). Figures represent the proportion of candidates from a particular occupation who won a seat against the total number of candidates from that occupation;  $n = 1918$  candidates in 1997; 1919 in 2001; 1880 in 2005; 1893 in 2010. See *Appendix II*.

Of all groups in Table 2, however, we see that union officials have the highest success rate of all; with 59.2% of candidates from such a background winning a seat, this is a higher success rate than any other group under examination. Now with its own discrete label, future success rates of union official candidates should be closely monitored.

Why do people with an inside knowledge of politics have this edge? The general explanation offered by Rose (1991: 65) is compelling in its simplicity: whereas 'outsiders' are essentially amateurs, those with 'inside' experience have a sharper understanding of how politics works, and thus have a better chance of getting elected. In the wake of the 2008/2009 MPs' expenses scandal, Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, opened his party's 'A-list' to people who had never been previously involved in politics. However, out of the 4,000 prospective candidates who came forward, only four were ultimately selected as candidates (Criddle, 2010: 316). Therefore, there is a real danger that, even if there is demand for outsiders who are in turn prepared to supply themselves as candidates, the demands of political parties appear skewed in the favour of insiders with political experience, almost certainly perpetuated by their proven higher success rate as candidates.

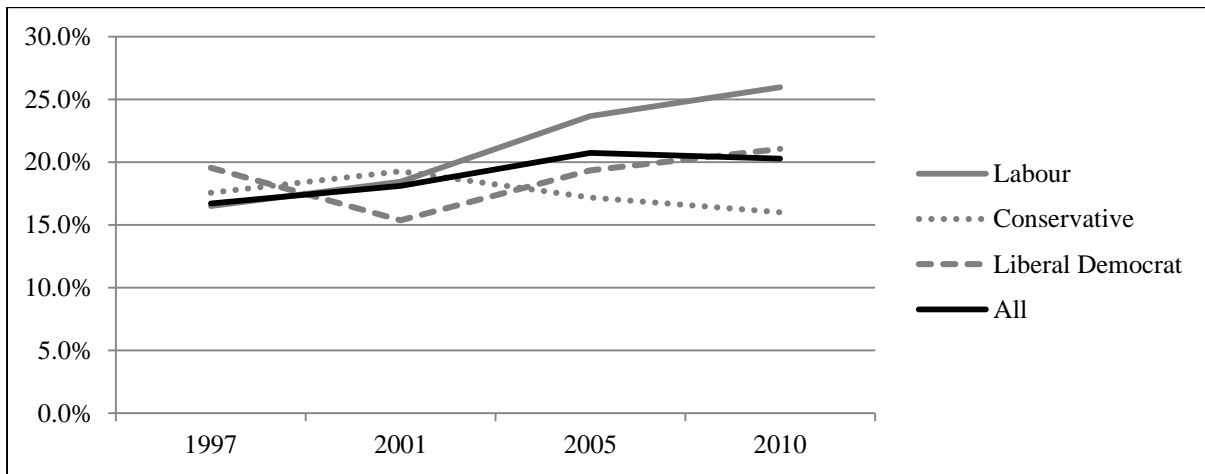
To return to trends among MPs, we can see very clear distinctions between the three main parties – the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. Whilst Figure 1 demonstrates that the proportion of each party’s MPs with a professional political background is higher in 2010 than in 1997, it also demonstrates that the rates of change within each party are divergent, with an average (mean) rate of increase of 3.0% for Labour after each election, compared to 0.3% for the Conservatives, 0.5% for the Liberal Democrats, and 1.6% overall. Indeed, despite the overall positive trend for each party, both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats experienced *decreases* in the amount of professionalised politicians among their parliamentary intakes. Moreover, by including the ‘publisher/journalist’ occupational category, the trend for the Conservatives becomes negative overall (-0.5%). This is significant for two main reasons. First, it demonstrates the importance of how MPs’ occupational backgrounds are classified; that is, whether we should consider publishers or journalists to be themselves ‘political’ in nature. Indeed, by including other occupations for 2010 such as union officials and those with backgrounds in public relations (see Figure 2), the gap between Labour and the Conservatives is extended further. Second, and implied in the first point, it demonstrates that trends are not uniform across the three main parties. Regardless of what occupations are included or excluded beyond the original ‘politician/political organiser’ category to identify career politicians, Labour has a higher proportion of professional politicians among its MPs.

**Figure 1:** MPs from politician/political organiser occupational background by party, 1997-2010



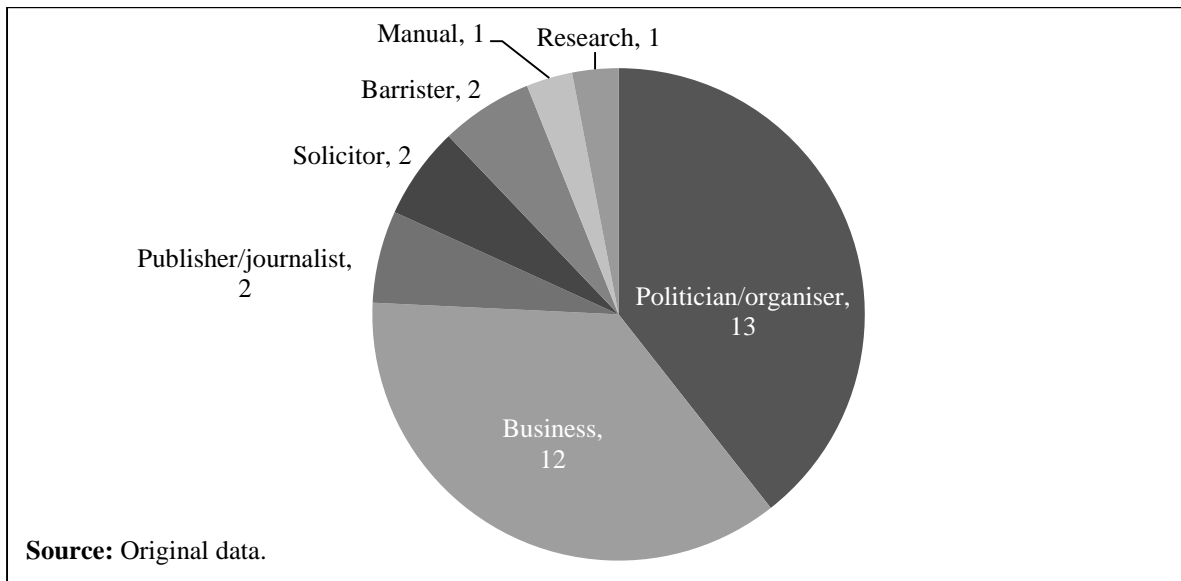
**Source:** Adapted from Butler & Kavanagh (1997; 2002; 2005) and Kavanagh & Cowley (2010).

**Figure 2:** MPs from politician/political organiser *or* publisher/journalist occupational background by political party, 1997-2010



**Source:** Adapted from Butler & Kavanagh (1997; 2002; 2005) and Kavanagh & Cowley (2010).

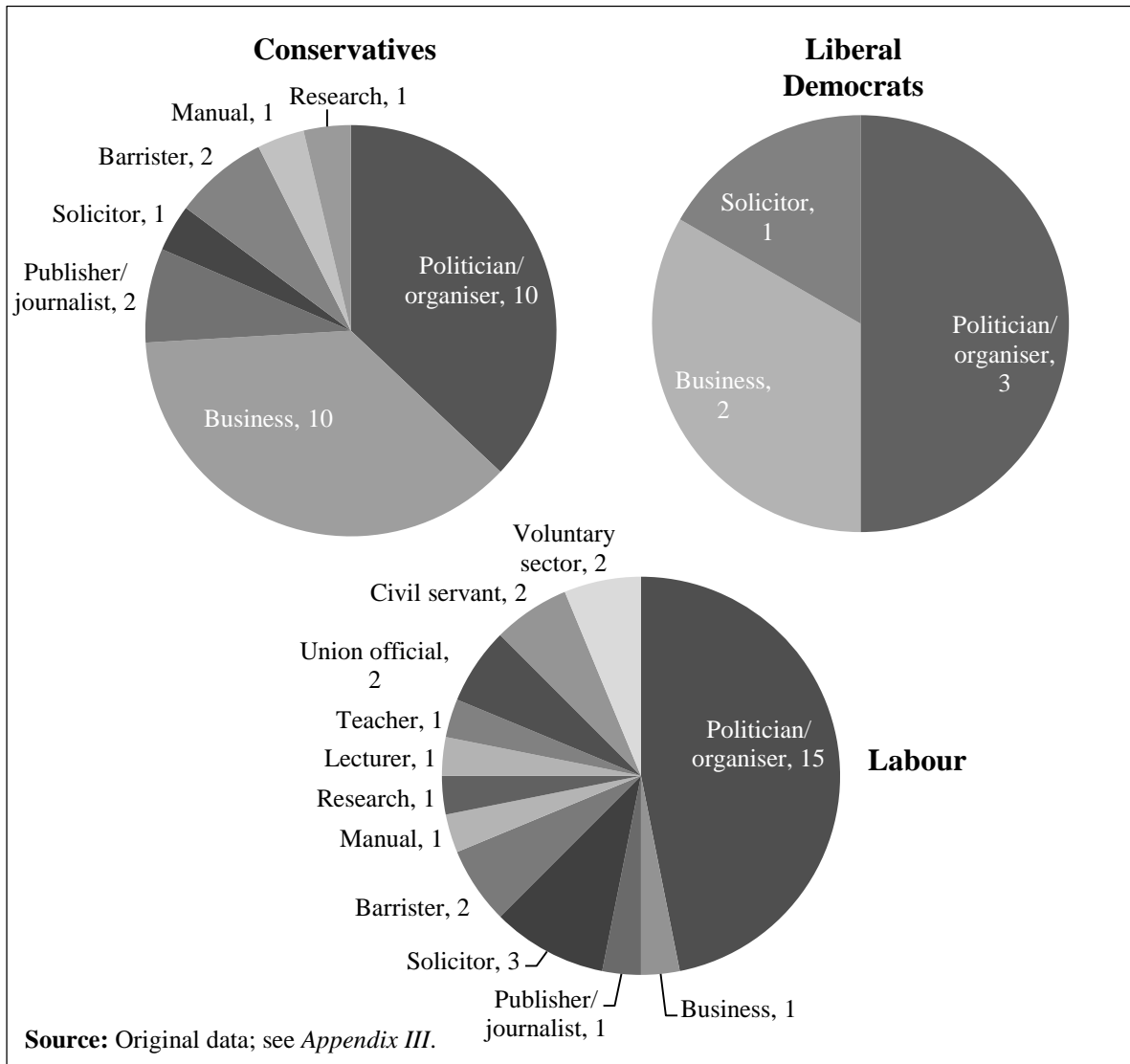
**Figure 3:** Occupational backgrounds of Cabinet ministers, as of 2014 (absolute figures in brackets)



**Source:** Original data.



**Figure 4:** Occupational backgrounds of Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet ministers by party, as of 2014 (absolute figures in brackets)



Finally, after establishing the overall continuation of the career politician's rise in the House of Commons since 1997, we should examine the extent of his or her presence at the most senior levels of government and opposition. Just as a candidate with professional experience directly related to politics had a disproportionate level of success in entering Parliament, Figure 3 clearly shows the further dominance of the professional politician in the most senior positions. Of the 33 members of the British Cabinet, more than one in three has previous experience of professional politics.<sup>4</sup>

Again, we see noticeable differences between the profiles of each party's senior team (see Figure 4). Labour appears to have the greatest variety in absolute occupational backgrounds in the Shadow Cabinet, while the Liberal Democrats have the fewest.<sup>5</sup> Those with experience in business are disproportionately represented in Conservative and Liberal Democrat positions in the Cabinet compared to the Commons as a whole (approximately one third against one quarter overall). However, what the three parties share in common is that professionalised politicians dominate the top tiers of positions. If we include the three 'instrumental' occupations identified by Cairney (2012), then despite its relative diversity, more than half of the current Shadow Cabinet derives from a professional background in politics. Thus, all the three main parties have a significant presence of career politicians, and this is exacerbated at senior level, most notably in the Labour Party.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Overall, this piece of quantitative analysis has confirmed the trend towards a professionalization of politics, with politicians and political organisers increasing as a proportion of the total number of MPs across the three main parties. This has implications for political parties and political scientists alike.

Political parties can respond to the continued rise of the career politician at two levels. Firstly, parties should promote a more occupationally diverse range of candidates. This has been possible along other dimensions, with Childs (2000: 69) attributing quotas in the Labour Party to boosted female parliamentary representation in 1997. It would seem extremely remote to expect that parliamentary seats should be reserved according to various occupations,<sup>6</sup> but political parties themselves can voluntarily show initiative. Indeed, just as David Cameron sought to broaden the Conservatives' candidates beyond those with professional experience in politics, there are signs that Labour is seeking to recruit more candidates from a working-class occupational background (Savage, 2012). In an era when parties struggle to prove their legitimacy (Mair, 2008: 212), parties can enhance their legitimacy through diversifying occupational representation, perhaps requiring a democratization of

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<sup>4</sup> Percentages are not used as each universe is  $\leq 100$ .

<sup>5</sup> This is likely to be influenced by the small number of Liberal Democrats in the Cabinet.

<sup>6</sup> See, however, Hassan (2013).

selection methods (see Shlomit and Rahat, 2007). Crucially, however, the higher success rates of those with existing experience in politics means that parties must lend particular support to candidates without such backgrounds.

Secondly, it is at the level of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet at which the career politician is both most visible to the public and most represented in number. All parties should thus be attentive to rebalancing the “two-track career path” identified by Cowley (2012: 36). The proportion of career politicians is particularly damaging for the Labour Party, basing criticism of the current Cabinet as ‘out-of-touch’ on grounds of the wealthy backgrounds of many ministers (Labour Party, 2012). If it wants to distinguish itself as a more diverse alternative, its argument would be more compelling if its own top team was not skewed so heavily in occupational terms to career politicians.

This article also has implications for future research. This study only examined the case of the United Kingdom, but in order to gain a richer context of the rise of the career politician and its consequences, comparisons with other democracies would be welcome. At present, such a study faces serious obstacles. Whilst the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS) attempts to build profiles of candidates across multiple democracies, the UK is not presently included, and candidates are not distinguished by party or occupational background. In addition, individual-level survey data of voters themselves would help parties to understand levels of demand for fewer career politicians or otherwise (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995: 11). However, beyond the questions that remain, this particular article demonstrates that individuals with a professional background in politics have a higher success as candidates than most other professional backgrounds, they have been increasing as a proportion of all MPs since at least 1997, and are currently the modal type of Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet member. In short, career politicians are still on the rise in British politics.

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