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Diversity and democracy in the Conservative Party
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- Although far from a microcosm of the UK population as a whole, the Tories are no longer a party of the elite or the upper middle class – something that could fairly have been said of them until well into the second half of the twentieth century.
- These changes have not, however, produced a Conservative Party, which can be said to be as diverse or as internally democratic as its main competitors – the centre-left Labour Party, the centrist Liberal Democrats or the nationalist Scottish National Party.
- Of the eight candidates for party leadership in 2022, four were women and four (including two of the women) were from ethnic minority backgrounds. At a closer look, the line-up of candidates was a long way from being a random selection of the UK public.
- Although a record 38 per cent of Tory MPs went to state comprehensives (while 17 per cent went to selective, state grammar schools), it nevertheless remains the case that some 44 per cent of Tories elected that year attended fee-paying schools.
- There was a slight increase the number of female Tories elected to the Commons in 2019 – but only from 21 per cent in both 2015 and 2017 to 24 per cent. However, this number could well go down should the Conservatives lose seats at the next election.
- There does not seem to be any proven link between the demographic composition of a party and people's willingness to vote for it. After all, in 2019, the Conservatives were estimated to have won some 43 per cent of C2DE voters, 44 per cent of female voters and 24 per cent of ethnic minority voters.

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Introduction

The British Conservative Party can lay claim to be one of the oldest and most successful political parties in the world. There are many reasons why that is the case. But perhaps the most important is its near-legendary ability to adapt in order to reflect the society in which it operates. It does this mainly by way of policy, making adjustments to its offer to the electorate according to changes in the economy and socio-cultural mores – some which it helps to shape, some which it has little choice but to accommodate itself to. Policy, however, isn't everything. The Conservatives have, over time, very gradually, but undeniably, come to look and sound a little more like the country they aspire to run.

Although far from a microcosm of the UK population as a whole, the Tories are no longer a party purely of the elite or, at the very least, the upper middle class – something that could fairly have been said of them until well into the second half of the twentieth century. They are also less uniformly white than they were a couple of decades ago – at least at the parliamentary level. And, at the level of the grassroots, there are arguably more (albeit still limited) opportunities for members to participate in decisions than there used to be, most obviously when it comes to choosing their party's leader.

All this was evidenced in the leadership contest held by the party in the summer of 2022, during which commentators from around the world remarked on the fact that both female candidates and candidates from ethnic minorities were well represented in the initial, parliamentary stage of the race – one which was followed by a full membership ballot that gave the grassroots a choice between a woman (Liz Truss) and a person of colour (Rishi Sunak), both of whom had already served in the highest reaches of government, she as Foreign Secretary, he as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

And, when Truss failed to impress and was forced to resign by her parliamentary colleagues after less than two months in the job, Sunak replaced her, thereby becoming the second man from a visible ethnic minority (the first was the 19th century Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli, who was Jewish) to become British prime minister.

These changes, most of which have come about since the turn of the century, have not, however, produced a Conservative Party which (either at Westminster or beyond) can be said to be as diverse or, indeed, as internally-democratic as its main competitors – the centre-left Labour Party, the centrist Liberal Democrats or the nationalist Scottish National Party – all of which can boast of being more demographically representative than the Tories. How much this advantages them (and disadvantages the Tories), though, remains a moot point – one reason, perhaps, why the Conservative Party is arguably neither as concerned about diversity nor as representative of the electorate as many might think.

The 2022 Leadership Contest – diversity on full display

Prior to 1998, when – in a major turn towards intra-party democracy – the party's rules were changed in order to allow rank-and-file, subscription-paying members not merely to participate in leadership contests for the first time but to have the final say, the election of Conservative leaders was a matter solely for its MPs, and they themselves had only been afforded a formal vote in 1965. The rule change (which established a two-stage process whereby members would decide between whichever two candidates were left standing after a series of eliminatory ballots held among MPs) was designed to assuage grassroots anger at the sleazy and divisive behaviour of a parliamentary party that had helped to ensure the Tories suffer a crushing defeat to Tony Blair's New Labour a year earlier. The rule change was also a *quid pro-quo* for a degree of centralisation that, for the first time, brought the component parts of the party within a unified governance structure. It was hoped, too, that giving ordinary members (who had long been charged with selecting the parliamentary candidates for their local constituencies) the chance to pick the party's leader would help arrest the seemingly inexorable decline in membership which the Tories (by no means uniquely among British parties) had been experiencing since the early 1950s when it had touched three million.

That hope, however, was never realised – membership, sadly, continued to drop, ending up in the low hundreds of thousands – and this was why, along with the woeful performance of Iain Duncan Smith, the first leader chosen under the new system in 2001, there was an attempt in 2005 by his successor (Michael Howard) to return the choice exclusively to MPs. That attempt, however, narrowly failed. So the contest in the summer of 2022 was the fourth to take place since then, only one of which had not gone through both the parliamentary stage and the subsequent extra-parliamentary stage, Theresa May being automatically elected leader when, Andrea Leadsom, the runner-up in the parliamentary stage dropped out before the extra-parliamentary stage could begin.

Of the eight candidates who obtained sufficient nominations to stand in the parliamentary stage of the race in 2022, four were women and four (including two of the women) were from ethnic minority backgrounds: Nadhim Zahawi, eliminated along with Jeremy Hunt in the first round, was originally from Iraq; Suella Braverman, eliminated after Zahawi and Hunt in round two, is of Indian extraction; Kemi Badenoch, who made it all the way to round four after Tom Tugendhat was eliminated in round three, was brought up in Nigeria; and Rishi Sunak, who finished top in the parliamentary stage, with Liz Truss as the runner-up, is of Indian heritage.

So far, so diverse – at least if one applies that term only to gender and ethnicity. Once we expand our definition to include socio-economic background, however, the picture looks rather different – and the candidates rather more (and critics would say depressingly) similar. Penny Mordaunt, who finished third in the parliamentary stage in the summer of 2022, hails from the least affluent (but still middle-class) background: she attended a state comprehensive (i.e. non-selective, mixed ability, publicly-funded) school, with parents who were, among other things, teachers. Liz Truss also went to a comprehensive school but was also from a middle-class background, with parents who were likewise involved in education, one as a professor of mathematics. Kemi Badenoch also did some of her post-16 education at a state further education college; however, she grew up with a father who was a doctor and a mother who was a university professor. Suella Braverman's parents – a nurse and a housing worker, were not so affluent but she was nevertheless privately educated (albeit with a partial scholarship which would have reduced the fees). Tom Tugendhat's father was a High Court Judge and a knight-of-the-realm and he himself attended one of London's elite independent schools, St Pauls. Jeremy Hunt's father, an admiral in the Royal Navy, was also knighted, and he attended the equally elite Charterhouse school. Rishi Sunak's parents – a pharmacist and a doctor, were less grand, perhaps, but still comfortable enough to send him to yet another elite independent school, Winchester. And Sunak, like four of the other candidates attended 'Oxbridge' (i.e. either Oxford or Cambridge, both of which take a far higher proportion of privately-educated students than other universities).

In short, the line-up of candidates for the leadership of the Conservative Party in the summer of 2022 was a long way from being a random selection of the UK public, or even, as it happens, UK politicians – including Conservative politicians.

Not quite as impressive – the Tories in the House of Commons

It is hardly surprising, perhaps, that the UK's centre-right, originally established to defend the interests of the country's landed aristocracy and gentry and then its business and professional elites, has been overwhelmingly represented in parliament by members of the middle and upper classes. Even when the arrival of democracy made it vital for the Conservatives to court the support of newly enfranchised working class voters – something they did very successfully by stressing their patriotism and their faith in capitalism's capacity to simultaneously generate both wealth and welfare – they very rarely selected working men (let alone working women or, indeed, until relatively recently, many women full stop) as candidates in winnable seats.

Unfortunately, at least for those who believe that the party's parliamentary representation should reflect the fact that it has routinely won at least a third (and in the post Brexit era an even greater proportion) of working class votes, nothing much has changed on that score. True, the only former miner elected to the Commons in 2019 happens to be a Conservative, albeit one who more recently had worked as a Labour councillor and as the office manager for a Labour MP. But not a single Conservative candidate at that election had worked as a trade union official, for instance. And if we take school attendance as a proxy for parental wealth, although a record 38 per cent of Tory MPs elected as a result of the party's big win in 2019 went to state comprehensives (while 17 per cent went to selective, state grammar schools), it nevertheless remains the case that some 44 per cent of Tories elected that year attended fee-paying schools – institutions attended by fewer than one in twenty of their Labour counterparts and fewer than one in ten of the UK population as a whole.

Admittedly, the percentage of Conservative MPs who attended Oxbridge declined between 2017 and 2019 but only from 34 to 29 per cent. Moreover, it is clearly the case that the further up the food-chain Conservative politicians travel – namely from candidate, to MP in a marginal seat, to MP in a safe seat, to junior frontbencher, to Cabinet minister, to leader – the more likely they are to have been privately- and Oxbridge-educated. As a result, any significant loss of seats at the next general election is likely to produce a parliamentary party that is even less representative, class-wise, than currently.

This is also likely to be the case when it comes to gender. The Conservatives have made some strides towards electing more women MPs, partly as a result of the efforts to 'modernise' the party by David Cameron when he took over as leader in 2005. But, because the party (supposedly on the grounds of 'meritocracy') has resolutely refused to copy the affirmative action measures adopted by other parties – most obviously Labour, whose decision to use all-women shortlists in some constituencies has resulted in a parliamentary party which, in 2019, was 51 per cent female – it continues to lag some way behind its competitors in terms of gender equality. True, there was a slight increase the number of female Tories elected to the Commons in 2019 – but only from 21 per cent in both 2015 and 2017 to 24 per cent. And, because the safest and more winnable constituencies have tended to pick male rather than female MPs, this number could well go down should (as seems highly likely) the Conservatives lose seats at the next election.

Interestingly, however, a significant loss of support in 2023 or 2024, is not likely to see a diminution in the number of Tory MPs from ethnic minorities. This is because progress on that score (which also began with David Cameron's 'modernisation' drive after 2005) has been achieved largely by the party making an effort, although only by exhortation and persuasion rather than any formal means, to get ethnic minority candidates selected in safe seats – partly on the assumption that (a) constituencies with large ethnic minority populations tend to vote Labour anyway and (b) that (as research shows) in other constituencies ethnic minority candidates tend to attract fewer votes than a white counterpart would have attracted and so need to stand in places where the Tory majority is so overwhelming that this 'ethnic penalty' will make little difference.

Even so, we should not get carried away. It may be that half of the candidates in the 2022 leadership contest were people of colour and that, following Liz Truss's victory, three of the four so-called great 'offices of state' (Prime Minister, Chancellor, Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary) were similarly accounted for – something that remains the case under Sunak. But in a country where around 15 per cent of the population can be so classified, the same can be said of only six per cent of Conservative MPs (compared to, say, 20 per cent of Labour MPs). Indeed, in 2019 the Tories elected more LGBT members (24) than people of colour (22), which, given that this equates to nearly seven percent of the parliamentary party, means that, in some ways remarkably, the proportion of non-straight people sitting on the Conservative benches at Westminster is around twice the proportion who self-identify as such in the adult population as a whole.

Closer to the stereotype – the Tory grassroots

We have no figures for the proportion of the 160,000 members eligible to vote in the leadership contest who identify as LGBT. But, thanks to the Party Members Project (funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council and run out of Queen Mary University of London and Sussex University) we have a fairly good idea of what the Conservative rank-and-file look like in other respects.

Beginning with ethnicity, and using the survey conducted after the 2019 election, Tory party members out in the country are overwhelmingly white British, with only four per cent coming from an ethnic minority – even fewer than the six per cent in the parliamentary party and certainly fewer than the 50 per cent who contested the leadership in 2022. As for gender, only 37 per cent are female, although this is clearly a much greater proportion than the mere 24 per cent of the parliamentary party made up by women. As for age, although the average Tory member is in their late fifties, four in ten are aged 65 and over – compared to just over two in ten of the adult population of the UK and, incidentally, fewer than one in ten Conservative MPs (who like most members of parliament tend, irrespective of party, to be in the 35 to 64 age range).

When it comes to class the party's grassroots members aren't very representative either. Some 80 per cent fall into social grades *ABC1* (which are routinely – if a little roughly and readily – used a proxy for the middle class). This compares to 57 per cent of the UK population as a whole, although the fact that this means 20 per cent fall into the *C2DE* category suggests that the Tory rank and file is at least slightly less *un*representative than those they help get elected to parliament.

This raises an interesting question, of course. Since the rank-and-file are the 'selectorate', is it their biases that are responsible for the lack of diversity on the Conservative benches in the House of Commons? Or should we point the finger, as it were, at 'supply' (ie the type of people coming forward to be candidates) rather than 'demand' (the preferences of those who get to choose between them)?

Undoubtedly, and ultimately, both will be involved – as will the selection criteria employed by the party, which vets an approved list of candidates from which local associations then get to choose.

And all elements of the process will, of course, feedback on each other. For example, if the criteria favour (as they seem to) those with the developed cognitive and presentational skills more commonly valued in better-off households and then honed by participation in higher education, and if candidates need to finance themselves through numerous selection contests at which a record of volunteering as a candidate and/or a councillor is often prized, then a woman of colour, say, with only a secondary education, limited means, and family responsibilities is less likely not only to make it through but to put herself forward in the first place.

Still, we can see from a survey of party members conducted after the 2017 election, that the Tory rank and file do have preferences that are likely to impact on, and indeed limit, diversity among the party's candidates and therefore its MPs. This is less the case, however, when it comes to gender than ethnicity. Although 48 per cent of Conservative members said they'd like the number of female MPs to say about the same, nearly as many (42 per cent) wanted to see more women in parliament. The corresponding figures for ethnic minorities were 49 and 31 per cent respectively, while when it came to Muslim MPs in particular they were 44 and 17 per cent, with 26 per cent confessing they'd actually like to see ***fewer*** of them. As for MPs from working class backgrounds, 53 per cent of Tory members were happy with the way things were (which, of course, means very, very few across parliament as a whole, let alone on the Conservative benches), even if 32 per cent said they'd like to see more. The pressure for more diversity within the Tory ranks at Westminster, at least among those who have the biggest say in selecting them as candidates, then, can hardly be called overwhelming.

Conclusion

It is, of course, perfectly possible to dismiss the Tory grassroots as lacking much influence in the counsels of a party that has always been very much a top-down affair. After all, according to the party's constitution, although it talks about 'having regard to the views of Party Members and the Conservative Policy Forum' (an organisation through which the grassroots can communicate their views on issues of the day to the leadership), 'The Leader shall determine the political direction of the Party'. Even its annual conference – so often a forum for democratic debate and decisions in other parties – is no more than a rally at which members get to cheer and applaud their leaders rather than actually vote on which policies they are supposed to put in their manifesto. And while ordinary members have the power to appoint the party's leader, it is only their MPs who get to decide if he or she should stay in the job via a vote of confidence at Westminster.

Still, that power of appointment means that the Tory grassroots play a hugely important role in the way the party is perceived by the voting public – and not just because so many of those perceptions depend on whoever becomes leader. In part because we now know so much about what the grassroots members look like (no thanks to the party itself, which is loathe even to share with the public the size of its membership let alone its composition), they, no less than the MPs, are effectively its representatives – even if, as research shows, fewer than one in five of them can convincingly be called 'activists' in any meaningful sense of that word.

In the summer of 2022, the British electorate, although denied any direct influence on the choice of the next Tory leader, were encouraged to believe that, in fielding so many female and ethnic minority candidates, the Conservative Party represented the UK in all its 21st Century diversity. This was not only a rather superficial, even misleading impression but one very obviously contradicted (as media report after media report made clear) by the make-up of the 0.3 per cent of voters – namely, the Conservative Party membership, who, unlike them, *did* get to choose the country's next prime minister. As a result, and given polling suggested a fair few voters were paying the contest a modicum of attention, people's impressions of the party, all of which feed into its overall 'brand', cannot help but have been affected.

This need not mean, of course, that any of this is bound to harm the Conservative Party's chances at election time. While research suggests that there is a connection between 'descriptive representation' (the extent to which people who make up a parliamentary party represent a microcosm of voters) and 'substantive representation' (the extent to which that informs the policies they advocate and implement), there doesn't seem to be any proven link between the demographic composition of a party (either in parliament or outside it) and people's willingness to vote for it. After all, in 2019, the Conservatives were estimated by the British Election Study to have won some 43 per cent of C2DE voters, 44 per cent of female voters and 24 per cent of ethnic minority voters – far higher proportions than the party itself can boast, either inside or outside parliament. It nevertheless remains the case that, whether we are talking about reality or merely perceptions, when it comes to diversity, the Conservative Party in the UK – notwithstanding the fact that it is now led by the country's first prime minister of Indian heritage – has a lot more work to do than it might like to imagine.

Impressum

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