A class of their own: Parliamentarians are less likely to be perceived as working class

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**Abstract**

To understand the relevance of class politics and the changing composition of our politicians, we must first understand how the public *derive* their views of social class and, importantly, that of their elected representatives. If the social class of representatives is to matter, the public must be able to at least partly accurately *infer* the social class of representatives. This paper addresses this question through a large conjoint experiment conducted in Britain (N=4157). In addition to a wide range of social class cues, participants were randomly exposed to distinct information conditions where statements about the hypothetical profiles under consideration were of individuals with political experience or not. The findings reveal meaningful differences in how social class markers are perceived between Members of Parliament (MPs) and the general public. Notably, MPs are consistently viewed as less working-class, even when they possess identical working-class attributes to an average member of the public. These results have implications for understanding how people derive the social class of others, especially elected representatives. The latter is important: the perceptual gap underscores a fundamental dilemma for the promotion of working-class representation in politics as working-class MPs are likely to struggle to be recognized as authentic representatives of the class groups they descriptively represent.

**Key words:** social class, class perceptions, conjoint analysis

**Introduction**

It is established that politicians in almost all democracies and legislative assemblies are not representative of the public, either within their electoral district or nationally. In the UK, politicians in Westminster are substantially different to the rest of the population on almost every metric: sex, age, disability, ethnicity, and even personality traits. This is the case in most or all established democracies (Gerring, Oncel, Morrison and Pemstein [2019](#_bookmark23); Carnes and Lupu [2016b](#_bookmark17)).

Many of these representative gaps between British parliamentarians and the electorate are closing through concerted efforts to recruit more representative candidates; yet, one gap remains and is growing: the class gap (O’Grady [2019](#_bookmark29); Bukodi, Evans, Goldthorpe and Hepplewhite [2024](#_bookmark14); Allen [2018](#_bookmark9); Heath [2015](#_bookmark25)). The shift away from working-class Members of Parliament (MPs) was sudden and stark, accelerating in the 1990s as the Labour Party under Tony Blair moved towards ‘professional politicians’ (Allen [2018](#_bookmark9)). By 2021, there has been an ‘almost complete disappearance of those with adult experience of working-class life’ on the leadership teams of both Labour and Conservative parties (Bukodi, Evans, Goldthorpe and Hepplewhite [2024](#_bookmark14)). At the same time, however, the proportion of the population self-identifying as working-class has remained stable, as have class differences (Evans and Tilley [2017](#_bookmark21)). This mismatch between the objective class and class identity of the public compared to that of elected representatives is purported to have widespread and potent effects. The decline of working class politicians is linked to a decline in class voting (Heath [2015](#_bookmark25)), greater abstention from the working class (Heath [2018](#_bookmark26)), the changing policy priorities of parties (Alexiadou [2015](#_bookmark6); Alexiadou, [2022](#_bookmark8); O’Grady [2019](#_bookmark29)), and how parties communicate and discuss class politics (Robison, Stubager, Thau and Tilley [2021](#_bookmark33)).

Politicians often exert significant effort in demonstrating their working-class credentials. In the recent 2024 election campaign in the UK, the leader of the UK Labour party – Sir Keir Starmer – launched a campaign video where he stated “I grew up working class.

I’ve been fighting all my life. [...] My dad was a toolmaker, so he worked in a factory. My mum was a nurse. [...] It was tough going at times."1 The rationale for playing up class origins is clear: in a political climate where discontent with the elite political class is high and perceived representativeness is low, signalling a class-based group appeal can rationally be viewed as an electoral strategy that can rally positive affect and electoral support from working class voters (Hoyt and DeShields [2020](#_bookmark27); Vivyan, Wagner, Glinitzer and Eberl [2020](#_bookmark38)). Starmer’s campaign video was, however, met by cynicism from some commentators who were critical of the Oxford-educated barrister’s claims to a working-class identity. This debate raises several important empirical questions: How do citizens classify individuals’ class-based identities? Like the case of Sir Keir Starmer, does *where you come from* (the son of a toolmaker and nurse) matter more than *where you are today* (a Barrister)? Does becoming a politician moderate the perceived class credentials of individuals irrespective of their class trajectory?

Our contention in this paper is that to understand the relevance of class politics and the changing composition of our politicians, we must first understand how the public derive their views of social class and, importantly, that of their elected representatives. Just as citizens use heuristics to infer others’ political positions and partisanship (Titelman and Lauderdale [2023](#_bookmark37); Ouellet and Tremblay-Antoine [2024](#_bookmark31)), people use heuristics to derive class position (Jæger and Larsen, [2024](#_bookmark28); Breyer [2024](#_bookmark13)). Individuals may generalise about class identity from a politicians’ origin, their formative occupation, education, and much else (Stubager, Tilley, Evans, Robison and Harrits [2018](#_bookmark35)). There is evidence that class origin, for instance, is more important than ‘current’ class in Britain (Evans, Stubager and Langsæther [2022](#_bookmark20); Langsæther, Evans and O’Grady [2022](#_bookmark30)). This is fundamentally important for the conclusions of existing studies. To understand how the class background of politicians matters, we need to understand how the public derive the perceptions of politicians’ class and whether the heuristics relied upon to infer class are distinct from those of the general population.

To answer this question, we present evidence from a conjoint experiment where British respondents were presented with diverse profiles of individuals which varied across a number of characteristics that serve as information signals regarding a person’s social class including, among other characteristics, the individuals’ occupation, the occupation of their parents and spouse, level of education, and home ownership. To assess whether citizens process class-related information signals about politicians asymmetrically to those of ordinary citizens, we created multiple treatment arms within the conjoint setting that manipulated whether respondents were asked to infer the social class of citizens or that of politicians (MPs and local councillors). Empirically, we find strong evidence that citizens do indeed derive significantly different judgements of (working) class status of politicians than they do for citizens. All else equal, a politician with working-class characteristics is seen as significantly *less* working-class than a member of the general public with the same working-class characteristics.

Our contributions are both empirical and theoretical. First, we provide an empirically rich and robust test of how individuals classify the social class of others. This is an important contribution in and of itself: understanding how perceptions (and misperceptions) or others can be shaped by inferential heuristics has implications for societal cohesion given it contributes to understanding group-based stereotyping. Moreover, our empirical results provide an important methodological contribution to those engaged in applied research designs that seek to manipulate social class. Our results provide a clear, empirically supported overview of which of the multi-dimensional characteristics of class shape citizens perceptions.

Second, and beyond our empirical contribution, we provide a unique theoretical addition to debates around class-based politics and descriptive representation. Theoretically, we posit that the classification of parliamentarians by citizens as working class is suppressed, even if they are by other measures - likely due to the fact that being an MP is itself a well-paid and high-status occupation. Empirically, we demonstrate thatacross a battery of multidimensional components of class, citizens are systematically less likely to classify legislators (whether MPs or councillors) as working class in the presence of symmetrical information about fellow citizens, and that this is particularly strong for MPs. This matters for our understanding of the consequences of descriptive representation as well as the potential efficacy of electoral campaigns that ‘play the class card’. Increasing the number of politicians with ‘working-class’ backgrounds and occupations (particularly the latter) is unlikely to directly assuage the perception that the descriptive makeup of Westminster doesn’t reflect the working class, because MPs are seen as less working class than they otherwise would be precisely because they are MPs – and this is especially the case for MPs with “|working-class” backgrounds and occupations.

**How do the public derive social class?**

#### Of the public

How do citizens derive and judge the social class of others? Whilst research has focused on the determinants of self-identification and how we ‘objectively’ measure social class, there has been less on how people derive the class of others. We follow Harrits and Pedersen ([2018](#_bookmark24)) in seeing this as a problem of social categorisation: ‘the ordering of social environment in terms of [...] groupings of persons in a manner which is meaningful’ (Tajfel [1974](#_bookmark36), p. 69). In other words: which social cues do people use to categorise others into a class structure?

Recent research in the Britain and Denmark - two societies characterised by substantially different levels of wealth, inequality, and traditional class conflict - find that people readily categorise others into classes and that this is typically related to traditional class structures, that being economic resources and position in the labour market. Using focus groups in Denmark, Harrits and Pedersen ([2018](#_bookmark24)) find that occupation and wealth - particularly the latter - are the primary structuring cues. Similarly, Robison and Stubager ([2018](#_bookmark32)) explore class associations, that is ‘what class *is*, that is, what people associate with the concept of class [...] for example, class as based on occupation’. Using a sample from Denmark, they find that a vast majority of respondents mentioned income and wealth, education, occupation, and family background as structuring classes, with occupation the dominant factor. Turning to the UK, almost all respondents readily ascribe attributes to class, and these are likewise income, occupation, education, and background, with back- ground more important in the UK than in Denmark (Stubager, Tilley, Evans, Robison and Harrits [2018](#_bookmark35)). In a similar vein, Evans, Stubager and Langsæther ([2022](#_bookmark20)) study differences in class *identity* in Denmark and the UK, yet find that class origin - operationalised via parental occupation - is about as important as current class - contemporary occupation - in the UK, but not in Denmark. In other words, in the UK more than Den- mark, where you *come from* matters at least as much as where you *are*. Overall, how people derive their class judgements of generalised others tracks closely with canonical measures of class, and specifically occupation, income or wealth, education, and social origin (typically measured as parental occupation).

The present paper partly provides a conceptual replication of this work (in particular, Stubager, Tilley, Evans, Robison and Harrits ([2018](#_bookmark35))). But beyond this, our methodological approach allows us to, amongst other benefits, vary additional attributes and calculate alternative quantities. Given that class is multidimensional, this first benefit is particularly useful: our results marginalise over (that is, control for) other included attributes, and given our range of variables, we minimise the chances of omitted variable bias.

#### Of politicians

Whilst this research is well-developed, little research has, to our knowledge, sought to understand how people derive the class of *their representatives*, nor whether and how this is distinct from the inferences individuals make of others in the general public. Important work has studied how class markers drive candidate *choice* and other forms of candid- ate *evaluation* (e.g Wüest and Pontusson [2022](#_bookmark39); Hoyt and DeShields [2020](#_bookmark27); Bahamonde and Sarpila [2023](#_bookmark10)). Most directly relevant to our case, Vivyan, Wagner, Glinitzer and Eberl (2020) use vignette candidate choice experiments in Britain, Germany, and Austria, to understand how the background of MPs (parental occupation) and their primary occupation (the occupation they had before entering Parliament) influenced whether a respondent would be ‘happy’ to have them as an MP. They find that, in Britain, MPs who had, or whose parents had, working- and lower-middle class occupations were preferred to those with upper-middle class occupations. Carnes and Lupu ([2016a](#_bookmark16)), however, found that British voters did not differently support candidates who were business owners (upper-class) or factory workers (lower-class), using a similar vignette candidate choice experiment. Respondents also did not distinguish between those with and without higher education. Whilst the estimates were not significant, if anything, the more ‘working-class’ candidates were preferred. With a similar approach, Carnes and Sadin ([2015](#_bookmark18)) found that differences in class background (parental occupation) and early-life education (state or private) predicted voters’ evaluations of representatives in the United States.

These studies inform our design, but our question is a parallel one. Our question is how people *derive* the class position of their representatives, not how a particular aspect of their profile (such as occupation) drives other evaluations. These are of course related questions, but we believe the more general question of how citizens derive class position is a separate and causally prior one. For instance, these studies use occupation as a measure of class, but it is quite possible that respondents do not use this as an equal class cue for representatives and the public. As noted above, class is multidimensional, and occupation is but one potential cue that is equal or perhaps less important than class background. Educational differences, which are widespread (Simon and Turnbull- Dugarte 2024), may similarly cue a variety of attributes, such as competence. In addition to these substantive differences, we also use multiple and more fine-grained measures of class. Carnes and Sadin ([2015](#_bookmark18)) for example uses only parental occupation and education as a measure of class, of which there are just two options each (factory worker and surgeon, public school or private); Carnes and Lupu ([2016a](#_bookmark16)) use current occupation (business owner or factory worker) and education (primary or secondary); Vivyan, Wagner, Glinitzer and Eberl ([2020](#_bookmark38)) use more fine-grained measures, but limit themselves to parental and primary occupation; Wüest and Pontusson ([2022](#_bookmark39)) use only contemporary class (occupation, education, and income). Again, we emphasise that these are not incorrect, but that a fuller understanding of how people derive class requires taking into account class’ multidimensional cues.

There are good reasons to hypothesise that citizens do not derive MPs’ class positions in the same way as the general population, which makes it more difficult to link these typical measures of class to the processes of descriptive representation. We outline two.

*MPs occupy a unique social, political, cultural elite*. It may be that parliamentary representatives operate in a distinct cultural world to the extent that they are perceived as a distinct and unique class. This notion is derived from Bourdieu, and the extent to which classes take the form of symbolic communities with similar lifestyles (Flemmen, Jarness and Rosenlund [2018](#_bookmark22); Bourdieu [1990](#_bookmark12); Bourdieu [1987](#_bookmark11)), and the Weberian idea of ‘status groups’. Similar interpretations are echoed in the contemporary discussion of the “political class” (e.g Allen [2018](#_bookmark9)) as distinct from the middle- or upper-class in its behaviours, attitudes, and demographic composition. As such, identification as an MP may result in respondents engaging in statistical discrimination, whereby their classification of MPs as working class is moderated by adjacent information they hold regarding what typical membership of this elite club looks like and entails. More generally, MPs are likely to engage in distinct socio-cultural activities that are unique to their group membership and, given socio-cultural activities correlate with (perceptions of) diverging social classes (Jæger and Larsen [2024](#_bookmark28)), perceiving MPs - regardless of their class origins

- to be culturally less working class is indeed likely.

*Background may be less relevant*. People derive class, at least in part, from contemporary conditions rather than background (Stubager, Tilley, Evans, Robison and Harrits [2018](#_bookmark35); Evans, Stubager and Langsæther [2022](#_bookmark20)). If an individual derives class from *contemporary* position (such as a high status, high pay occupation, and so on), then an MP’s back- ground may be less relevant when it comes to deriving their class position as it is derived from their current occupation. In addition, this may vary depending on the background measure: formative occupation, for instance, may be less important than parental occupation. As such, if someone becomes an MP - given that it is a high status and high pay occupation - other factors are likely to become irrelevant.

These arguments lead to the same expectations. Primarily, and most intuitively, that politicians will be seen as *less* “working class” than the general population, all else held equal, and that this is more likely the case for MPs than councillors. That is, on average, MPs will be seen as less working class than councillors who will be seen as less working class than the general population. Perhaps less obviously though, both arguments also suggest that the formative occupation of MPs matters less than for the general public. Being an elected representative is, at its most basic, an occupation, and this is likely to suppress the role of the primary or formative occupation in determining (perceived) class position, whether that is because of the unique position of being a representative or the primacy of one’s most recent occupational role.

In the remainder of the paper, we ask: how do the public sort political representatives into social classes, and does it differ from how people sort other members of the lay public?

**Experimental design**

We fielded a survey in Britain, using a nationally representative sample from YouGov (N=4157). In addition to embedding a conjoint experiment within the survey, our experimental design also randomly assigned respondents to different information conditions (Acharya, Blackwell and Sen [2018](#_bookmark7)): half of the sample received additional information on the political experience (None, Councillor, Member of Parliament) of the profile (the ‘political experience’ attribute) whilst we did not show this attribute to the other half. Doing so allows us to identify how variation in information related to the population of profiles being considered (i.e., regular citizens or politicians) conditions the prevalence of working-class classifications.

**Operationalising class**

Alongside this randomisation in the information environment, our conjoint design simultaneously randomized eight attributes drawn from the literature on how people derive class position. We provide these attributes, their potential values, and the class dimension in Table [1](#_bookmark0) and an example of how the conjoint profiles were visually presented to respondents is depicted in Figure [6](#_bookmark42). The *occupation* attributes are sourced from Evans and Tilley ([2017](#_bookmark21)), which itself stems from the Goldthorpe scheme of occupational class. Specifically, we have a value for each of the following classes: traditional working class, new working class, traditional junior middle class, new junior middle class, old middle class, new middle class. We selected these occupations from the examples of Evans and Tilley ([2017](#_bookmark21)) but select those that are likely to be plausible occupations today (for in- stance, we do not include ‘seamstress’). This provides a variety of occupations and allows us to parse out the differences (if any) between new and old occupations within each class. For education, we describe the person’s educational achievement, from leaving school at 16, to going to University, and specifically Oxford, given the predominance of that University amongst the British political elite. We also include home ownership as a feature of wealth, with the home ownership values derived from the British Election Study. We do not include income, since this is likely heavily correlated with occupation and wealth (for instance, Evans and Tilley ([2017](#_bookmark21)) also do not measure income, since occupation ‘determines people’s current and future earnings’).

We include two attributes for class background: parents’ occupation with the same values as described and region of birth. Given the vast regional inequalities in the UK, we suspect that region provides a useful cue to respondents about class background and British MPs, given the constituency focus in the UK, regularly draw attention to their regional roots. Finally, we include sex and age.

Our key attribute of interest is in the final highlighted row, and has three values: being an MP, being a councillor, and never held political office. We include councillor to address

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Attribute** | **Values** | **Class dimension** |
| Primary occupation | Farm labourer; supermarket employee; secretary; legal assistant; university lecturer; paramedic; barrister; website designer | Occupation |
| Home ownership | Owns home outright; Ownhome on mortgage; Rented from local authority; Ren- ted from a private landlord. | Wealth |
| Parents’ primary occupation | Farm labourer; supermarket employee; secretary; legal assistant; university lecturer; paramedic; barrister; website designer | Background |
| Region | Scotland; Wales; NorthernIreland; London and the South East (such as Hamp- shire); the North East (such as Newcastle); the South West (such as Ply- mouth); the North West (such as Blackpool) | Background |
| Partner’s occupation | Farm labourer; supermarket employee; secretary; legal assistant; university lecturer; paramedic; barrister; website designer |  |
| Education | Left school at 16; Has beento college; Has been to University; Went to Oxford | Education |
| Sex | Male; Female | NA |
| Age | 24; 35; 46; 57; 68, 79 | NA |
| Political office | Is a local councillor; Is anMP in Westminster; No, has never held political office. | NA |

Table 1: Attributes in the conjoint

whether it is being any representative or *specifically* an MP. To reiterate, this attribute was only shown to 50% of the (randomly selected) sample and random exposure to the political information attribute was held constant for an individual respondent.

Prior to the profiles, respondents are told: ‘We will now present two **DIFFERENT** people - A and B – and ask you some questions about them. Please read their profiles carefully.’ After reading the profiles (Person A and Person B), they are asked: ‘Thinking about these two profiles, please rate them on a scale from working class to upper class’, with a five-point response scale, ranging from 1 = Working class to 5 = upper class, and for which they answer for both profiles.2 We dichotomise this such that 1= working class and 0 = all other responses. We provide additional analyses on the original scale (and for other outcomes, such as respondents opting for “middle class” (1) or not (0)) in the Appendix. This is our core dependent variable. We also impose a small randomisation restriction, such that some occupations cannot appear alongside low education which would not be possible in Britain: barristers, university lecturers, and paramedics must have university-level education (i.e., ‘has been to University’ or ‘Went to Oxford’). All other combinations are possible. No other restrictions are applied. This does mean that some unlikely combinations are possible, but given such combinations are not *impossible* in reality, they are not restricted. Finally, the order of the attributes was also randomised between but not within respondents, limiting the potential for ordering effects. Half of our sample completed two iterations, whilst the other half completed four iterations.

We present the number of observations by treatment in Table [2](#_bookmark1), along with their mean “working class” classification: i.e., the percentage of profiles identified as working class (1) versus any other response (0). Note that the N of observations and the corresponding percentage value refer to the evaluations of individual profiles (N=33256) rather than individual respondents (N=4157).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Treatment arm** | **Observations (%)** | **Mean working class****classification** |
| Control | 16672 (50%) | 0.24 |
| Treated as no experience | 4153 (17%) | 0.26 |
| Treated as councillor | 4114 (16%) | 0.21 |
| Treated as MP | 4119 (17%) | 0.17 |
| Total N | 33256 (100%) | 0.22 |

Table 2: Means and N across samples

**Results**

**How do people derive class?**

We start by presenting the overall marginal means for which attributes causally effect how respondents classify profiles as working class in Figure [1](#_bookmark2).3 The baseline mean is 0.22, meaning 22% of the randomly compiled profiles were characterised as working class, indicated by the vertical line.

These show remarkable consistency with previous research on the determinants of class categorisation in Britain. First, occupation has a large effect, with the working-class occupations being clearly related to attributing the profile as working class; meanwhile, culturally and economically middle-class jobs, such as University lecturers and barristers, sharply reduce the probabilities of a profile being working class. The only surprising occupation is perhaps paramedic - a highly qualified and well-paid job - which has only a small negative effect, which may be due to the role being identified with the UK’s public healthcare provider, National Health Service. Class-ambiguous jobs, like secretary and website designer, are also not significantly distinct (p<0.01) from the median classification and have relatively small effects. Spousal occupation has varied effects, being not significant for website designers, paramedics, and secretaries, and significant but minimal in effect size; yet the effects for barrister (decreasing the probability of being assigned as working class) and supermarket employee and farm labourer (increasing the probability) are sizable relative to the other coefficients. We also identify wealth, measured as housing, as having clear and slightly smaller effects: those owning outright are less likely to be seen as working class, whilst those renting from a local authority are more so. Those with a mortgage or renting privately are not significantly different from the mean, likely reflecting that these are ambiguous and the population average. Education has a clear effect, with the stark divide being going to university or not. The effect of leaving school at 16 and having a college-level education on working class classification are indistinguishable from one other, whilst there is a clear distinction between college and university. Notably, going to Oxford – as opposed to just going to university – is results in a significantly lower probability of being identified as working class. In other words, when compared to those who have gone to any university – i.e. those who are very unlikely to be viewed as working class – being associated with a “prestige school" still lowers one’s working-class classification even further.

Importantly, class *background*, measured as parental occupation, has a marginally weaker role in determining one’s class position. Consider, for example, the probability of being perceived as working class between barristers and those who work in a supermarket when we consider these occupations to by contemporary or of the profile’s parents. The difference when considering parental occupation is notably smaller at 0.13 (0.3-0.17) in comparison to the difference when consider contemporary occupation at 0.28 (0.37 vs 0.09). This suggests that the importance of class background (or class origins) in being perceived as (working) class is determined more by one’s contemporary occupation. This is complementary with the findings of Evans, Stubager and Langsæther ([2022](#_bookmark20)) that background and contemporary position are similarly related to class in the UK but provides additional nuance through the virtue of the conjoint design. Returning to our opening example, Sir Keir Starmer’s claim to working class roots is likely to increase the public perception of his working-class credentials despite his pre-parliamentary upper-middle class job, though less so than if his primary occupation was less privileged.

Sex, age (reported in the appendix), and region are insignificant determinants of working-class classification. There is some indicative evidence that profiles from Northern Ireland are perceived as more working class than the average, but they are not perceived as significantly more working class than individuals form any region other than the South East. The effect, if anything, is also very small.

[FIGURE 1]

Figure 1: Marginal means of working-class classification

**The public and politicians**

We test whether being an MP changes the effects of the class attributes by taking the difference in marginal means between the sample randomly treated to the information that the profiles are of MPs and i) different ‘political experience’ treatments (councillor and ‘no experience’) and, ii) those not exposed to any treatment condition (the ‘control’). These differences are reported in Figure [2](#_bookmark3). A positive difference indicates that the given attribute value produces a profile perceived as more “working class” and the MP-treated profile is less working class. First and most notably, thee results of these estimated differences reveal that an MP is considered less working class than the general population – and, to a lesser extent, councillors – with the symmetrical attribute values and across all attributes. In real terms, all else equal, MPs from a working-class background are seen as less working-class than the general public or councillors from a working-class background. The similar effects between councillors and the general population suggests this the variation induced from being MPs cannot be explained by their being ‘political’ or equivalent generally, but rather being an MP *specifically*. This may be for several reasons, but perhaps most straightforwardly reflects the (real and perceived) higher salary and social status of holding parliamentary office.

[FIGURE 2]
Figure 2: Marginal means of social class

Yet, we also see that, regarding contemporary occupation, MPs are no different to the general population and councillors *with regard to middle-class occupations*, but are seen as less working class than the general population *who have working class occupations*. In other words, being an MP reduces the likelihood of being classified as working class given some occupations. We also see that background is unlikely to matter in the case of being seen as working class, in which there is little difference and, most importantly, the MP profiles are always seen as less working class relative to the general population and, by and large, councillors with those same attributes.

[FIGURE 3]
Figure 3: Marginal means of social class

In Figure 3 we visualise the probability of a profile being ascribed to ‘working class’ when attributes are set to the most working class values, which we derive from Figure 1, for MPs, councillors, and a member of the public.4 This shows that given these attributes, an MP is likely to be considered working class 57% of the time, whilst a generalised person is 65% to 67% of the time - a 7 to 9 percentage-point gap - and councillors 62% of the time. Given the mean probability of being prescribed to working class is 22%, this represents approximately a third difference in the mean. Put another way, even given a most-likely scenario, MPs are consistently less likely to be seen as working-class than either the general public or politicians at a more local level.

[FIGURE 4]
Figure 4: Marginal means of working class for MP profiles only

Finally, in Figure 4, we ask a slightly different question focusing on MPs: given that the profile is an MP, how do MPs appear more working class? MPs do not compete electorally with the general public, but other MPs, and therefore there may still be a benefit from highlighting their class position. These results show that there is much less variation to be exploited: a farm labourer compared to a barrister is a change of 14 percentage-points, compared to 26 percentage-points for the group who are not treated to the political experience attribute. A farm labourer MP still has only 25% chance of being attributed to the working class, not much more than the mean of 22%; results are similar for class background (i.e., parental occupation).

Similar to the results for the public, an MP can differentiate themselves the most based on occupation: the difference in probability of being seen as working class between a MP who was a barrister and an MP who was a supermarket employee is 16 percentage-points. Similarly, an MP who went to Oxford is allocated to the working class 12% of the time versus 25% of the time for an MP who left school at 16 (16% and 23% for university and college, respectively). It is worth noting that this complements the results of Campbell and Cowley (2014) who find that candidate education is the strongest determinant of support. Additional results, including interaction tests, are in the Appendix.

**Conclusion**

Politicians often attempt to demonstrate their claim to being working class. But how do the public sort political representatives into social classes, and does it differ from how people sort other members of the lay public? People may infer social class from a politicians’ origin, their formative occupation, education, and much else. We test this using a nationally representative conjoint experiment in Britain, in which we randomly vary multiple dimensions of class and the political experience of the (hypothetical) person.

Our results indicate that MPs are seen, on average, as less working-class than a generalised other, as well as more local representatives (councillors). Respondents determine class position consistent with previous work on class categorisation in the UK, namely, that contemporary occupation and class background are the most and about as equally important, whilst education and wealth are closely behind (Stubager, Tilley, Evans, Robison and Harrits 2018). The region one was born in, gender, and age are not substantially relevant determinants. Most importantly, however, the most “working class” values of these attributes only enhance this gap: being a farm labourer, supermarket employee, or secretary, is more closely associated with working classness in the general population and amongst local political office holders than amongst the most elite political office, MPs, whilst middle-class occupations like University Lecturers and Barristers are no different. This is an interesting nuance to our starting expectation that office-holding suppresses the importance of formative occupation: it only does so for working-class occupations. The same is true for wealth and, to a lesser extent, education. What this means is that, for any given working-class MP, they will be seen as less working class than they would be if they were not an MP, precisely because they are an elected representative; middle-class MPs do not experience the same ‘office penalty’ in suppressing their class attributes. We support this by setting attribute values to the ‘most working class’: this leads to an MP being considered working class 57% of the time, whilst a generalised person is 65% - 67% of the time - an 8 percentage-point gap - and a councillor 62% of the time (Figure 3).

Our core (empirical) contribution is to provide a rich and robust test of which informational heuristics people use to classify people - from laypeople, councillors, and MPs - into social classes. These results, and the rich data that underlies them, provides a useful methodological contribution for researchers that likewise wish to operationalise social class in Britain, and perhaps other, contexts. Yet beyond this we provide a more important contribution: parliamentarians (and, to a lesser extent, other representatives) are less likely to be classified as working class than the general public, even with other- wise identical class markers; although we can’t say why, the most obvious reason is that MPs are highly paid relative to the general population, and this is well-known. This has implications for the consequences of descriptive representation. Simply “adding in class” is unlikely to have as much a direct effect on perceived representation as might be hoped, since as soon as objectively working-class people become representatives, they are seen as less working class. And this has implications for politicians and campaigns that seek to emphasise class identities or markers: whilst it is likely to reap some benefit (particularly relative to more privileged MPs and candidates), it may still not be as effective as they might hope.

**Notes**

1See the post shared on X here: <https://x.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1793581014456918218>

2The full responses are 1= Working class, 2= Lower middle class, 3= Middle class, 4 = Upper middle, 5 = Upper class.

3Note this is the full sample, including those treated and not. The results do not change if we restrict it to those untreated, except with larger confidence intervals.

4This is if a person is a farm labourer, as are their parents, they rent from a local authority, come from Northern Ireland, left school at 16, are a male, aged 57, and their spouse is a supermarket employee.

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