

What do we mean when we talk about the ‘political class’?

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an explosion of popular complaint about the British ‘political class’. Within this narrative, the political class are feckless, unrepresentative, immoral, and elitist. They rule over ‘ordinary people’ from Westminster with no conception of what ‘real people’ think. How can we respond to such complaints? We argue that a coherent solution will only be possible when we can define the problem clearly. ‘Political class’ should not be a catch-all description of elected politicians. Instead, we divide the ‘political class’ narrative into three distinct but related concepts - the political elite, political professionalization, and political careerism – to highlight the ways in which the term needlessly conflates distinct ideas and adds more confusion to an already vague debate.

Introduction

“We pose a threat to the entire British political class. I’ll drink to that.” Nigel Farage, 2014 (in Dearden, 2014).

Although not an exclusively contemporary concern (Weber, 1919; Mosca, 1939; Guttsman, 1965), recent years have seen an explosion of comment on the failings of the ‘political class’. It is now commonplace in Britain to bemoan its failings – but exactly what does ‘political class’ mean? We identify *six* ways in which it is used to identify, in elected politiciansⁱ, their: flawed characters; limited roots in local constituencies; inexperience of the real world; inability to reflect the social background of the voting population; inability to represent devolved and English regions; and, their tendency to engage in a style of politics that is off-putting to the general public.

The resultant lack of clarity within debates on the ‘political class’ undermines a coherent response to the alleged problems. Instead, individual actors, such as political parties, have exploited the vague nature of the phrase to further their pet solutions. We argue that the ‘political class’ narrative conflates three distinct concepts from political studies – the political elite, the professionalization of politics, and political careerism – and that we can introduce more systematic analysis under those headings. To that end, we ask three main questions. What are the popular complaints about the ‘political class’? How have academics used the term? Can the existing literature and academic concepts help us to provide a clearer definition, more conducive to a coherent solution to the problem?

What are the complaints and who are they directed at?

Broadcast, print and social media commentators argue that elected politicians in the UK are not representative of their constituents. They are part of a self-referential 'political class' which is increasingly distant from the real world and mistrusted by the public (Cairney, 2014). Examples include Andrew Neil's documentary 'Posh and Posher: Why Public School Boys Run Britain' (see Crone, 2011) and his assertion on BBC2's *Daily Politics* that 'all MPs will end up looking and sounding the same' if 'hand-picked by the party high command'. Similar is Leo McKinstry's (2014) claim that:

the political class inhabits its own bubble, utterly divorced from the lives of voters ... too many professional politicians ... have no experience of the real world. Precious few have backgrounds in the working class, the private sector or business. A vast number of MPs, particularly on the Labour and Liberal Democrat benches, are nothing more than ambitious careerists who worked in politics, pressure groups, think tanks, local government and the civil service before winning their seats (see also, Mason and Gani, 2014; Grimson, 2014; Kirkup, 2014; Lamont, 2014; Cohen, 2014).

This argument is difficult to pinpoint and operationalise, and we can identify *six*, potentially contradictory, ways in which these problems have been framed. The first three relate to the backgrounds and characteristics of members of the political class, whilst the second three are focused on their supposed behaviour.

The first argument is that many *candidates have no roots in their local constituencies* – a charge linked to national party offices placing preferred candidates in seats when they become available, and media glee when non-local candidates are caught out in hustings (Childs and Cowley, 2011: 6; Rush, 2001: 204). A second relates to their *inexperience of the real world*: politicians are increasingly unlikely to hold 'proper jobs' before being elected, with particular disgust reserved for those who work solely in politics prior to becoming an MP. UKIP has exploited this inability of other parties to represent 'ordinary' members of the public (Aaranovitch, 2004; Ford and Goodwin, 2014). Its 2014 European Parliament election material, and its leader, criticised other parties for living up to the 'political class' caricature:

We've just about had enough of a career class of politician ... Look at the three so-called 'big parties' and look at their front benches. They are made up of people who go to the same handful of schools, they all go to Oxford, they all get a degree in PPE ... then they all get a job as a researcher in a political office, they become Members of Parliament at 27 or 28, Cabinet ministers in their early 40s, and I put it to you that this country is now run by a bunch of college kids who have never done a proper day's work in their lives (Nigel Farage, UKIP leader, 2nd May 2014 – see Taylor, 2014).

In this case, candidates are recruited from an increasingly narrow pool of 'politics facilitating' occupations. In the past, *brokerage* occupations were relatively conducive to entering political life. These are the jobs – including lawyers, teachers, and lecturers – providing general skills, such as articulacy, or advantages, such as a link to the local

community, flexible hours or proximity to Westminster. There has been a long-term rise in recruitment from ‘*instrumental*’ occupations, which have a clearer link to politics and may be used as a stepping stone towards elected office’, such as MP and party assistants, and members of think tanks (Cairney, 2007: 214). These jobs support candidates until they are elected and may help them become elected. An even smaller pool, from jobs related directly to Westminster or government, may be described as *promotion-facilitating* since they appear to help MPs achieve rapid promotion within parties and enter the political elite (Cowley, 2012; Allen, 2013). Consequently, we hear that the political class exists within its own ‘bubble’. This is also an argument in which blame is attributed to *political parties*.

Occupational background is one element of a third argument: that elected politicians, as a group, *do not reflect the social background of the population*. Elected representatives are more likely to be white, male, privately educated, and graduates of elite Universities, than the general population (on MPs, see Rush, 1969; Criddle, 2005, 2010; McGuinness, 2010; Cairney, 2007; on MSPs, AMs and MEPs, see Keating and Cairney, 2006; Cairney, 2014; on local councillors, see Thrasher, 2014). Much of the blame may still be placed on political parties, as the organisations providing the demand for candidates, but there can also be an institutional response to change the incentives regarding supply. For example, Westminster is criticised regularly for undermining the incentives for women and minorities to engage (Lovenduski, 2005: 26-8; McVeigh, 2014; House of Commons, 2010).

A second set of arguments relates to the alleged behaviour of the political class. One argument relates to their *flawed characters*: they are ‘self-serving’ (Osborne, 2007) and/ or ‘overpaid and dishonest’ (Guido Fawkes, 2009) – an argument reinforced during the Westminster expenses scandal in 2009 (House of Commons, 2010: 3) and evidence that politicians use their experience for personal gain following their exit from Parliament (González-Bailon et al., 2013). There is evidence of public belief in the corruption of public institutions, which peaked in 2009 (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2014: 6-7), and low trust in politicians during the last 30 years (Ipsos MORI, 2013; Lee and Young, 2014: 70). This problem can prompt an *institutional* response, such as common standards for all MPs or a right of recall for individual MPs (Judge, 2013).

There are two further arguments about the behaviour of the ‘Westminster’ political class which rose in prominence during the debate on Scottish independence. Many people planned to vote for independence because they felt alienated by Westminster politicians (Robinson, 2014; ICM, 2014, [table 11](#)). One interpretation is that ‘*Westminster*’ represents a remote arena for politics which does not represent devolved and English regions well. Another is that *Westminster is the home of an adversarial style of politics* allegedly rejected in Scotland. This image was used in the run up to Scottish devolution in the 1990s, with ‘old Westminster’ contrasted with ‘new Scottish politics’. According to this narrative, the image of the UK Government was top-down and adversarial, which contrasted with the alleged Scottish tradition of collective action and consensus politics. Devolution produced expectations about new forms of participation and more consensual policymaking between parties, or between parliament and the executive. When Scottish politics didn’t work out as

intended - even after electoral reform, the introduction of a quite-distinctive Scottish Parliament, and periods of coalition and minority government - Scottish independence was presented as a second chance for political reform (Cairney, 2011; 2014; Cairney and McGarvey, 2013; Cairney and Johnston, 2014; Electoral Reform Society Scotland, 2012).

Many solutions to many problems?

As a whole, the complaints point to a broader failure of representation, descriptively and substantively (see Lovenduski, 2005). They encompass descriptive failure in the sense that the politicians are not like those they are meant to represent, and substantive failure in the way they have not represented their interests. The 'political class' narrative often combines these complaints, making them less about the behaviours or composition of certain elements of the political class, and more about the misleadingly simple complaint that a political class exists.

Consequently, it is difficult to reconcile these arguments to produce one strategy for political reform. For example, Westminster as an institution has produced its own plans to address one argument – on corruption and MP behaviour – but has left most other issues to political parties. Further, political parties differ markedly in their attitude and focus. The Conservatives are more focused on avoiding 'professional politicians' and finding candidates who have 'proved themselves' outside politics, largely at the expense of local candidates (Cairney, 2007: 218-9; Childs and Cowley, 2011: 6). Labour is the most likely to use AWS coordinated by a national party, which are often criticised or rejected by local constituency offices and candidates (Childs and Cowley, 2011: 2-3; Evans, 2008: 599) and have been shown to elect politicians with almost exactly the same backgrounds as their colleagues (Allen et al., 2014). Crucially, local party selectorates appear to remain suspect of these measures, as demonstrated by the experiences of the Conservatives when adopting the 'A-List' in order to boost candidacies from outside the traditionally-represented types (Campbell et al, 2006; McIlveen, 2009). It might well be the case that local selection panels still regard characteristics associated with the 'political class' as core components of what makes a good politician.

Parties remain vulnerable to criticism when they try to solve one part, and ignore or exacerbate other parts, of a multi-faceted problem. A focus on increasing the descriptive presence of an underrepresented group is relatively straightforward in the case of women or MPs from BME backgrounds (Squires, 1996). The wider political class problem does not offer such clear solutions. First, it doesn't map onto a single individual-level characteristic to be enhanced. Second, it often relates to *over*-representation, particularly in the most senior political positions. Third, at least part of the issue seems to be the presence of 'politicians' themselves, seen as a negative force, something which, to be rectified, would involve removing politicians from politics or significantly altering the processes by which individuals enter political life (Rush, 1994; Hay, 2007). Unless the problem is defined more clearly, no single solution will help.

How have scholars tried to clarify the 'political class' problem?

A solution to the 'political class' problem begins with conceptual clarity. A meaningful solution must be attached to a well-defined problem. Has this clarity been produced by scholars? Certainly, it is a subject that has attracted the attention of many, but there is still ambiguity in the literature (see Weber, 1919; Mosca, 1939; Guttsman 1963; Stanworth & Giddens, 1974; King, 1983; Burch & Moran, 1985; Kavanagh, 1992; Borchert & Zeiss, 2003; Cotta and Best, 2007; Rush and Cromwell, 2000).

For example, Mosca (1939, pp.50-51) describes a ruling or political class that 'performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings'. The political class have power, dominate all of politics, and are drawn from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Uwe Jun (2003, p.141) updates Mosca's analysis to include non-elected actors:

While MPs are at the center of the political class, the group also includes the growing numbers of political consultants, political advisors to ministers, research assistants to MPs, as well as the staff at party headquarters, in the House of Commons, and in policy research institutes working for the parties. To this list should also be added lobbyists working for interest organizations. On the regional and local level the class includes the members of newly established legislatures and assemblies, their staff and political advisors, and the growing number of professional councillors and members of local government. The last of these groups increasingly constitutes the pool of recruitment for the lower House of Parliament.

Similarly, drawing on Mosca and Weber, Jens Borchert identifies how 'the collective interest in a reliable income from politics and in a reasonable chance for career maintenance and advancement constitute the modern political class as a collectivity' (2003, p3). This kind of updated-classic description confuses matters further, since a multi-faceted problem now extends to a much larger group of people.

Perhaps a more practical side of the literature relates to distinct categories of people, processes, or activities – such as the ideas of political *elite*, *professionalization*, and *careerism*.

The political elite are distinct from the broader membership of the political class in that they sit at the top and can act collectively as a group (Guttsman, 1974, p. 23; Borchert, 2003, p.3-4). On these terms, complaints focused on the composition, behaviour, or policy decisions of, say, cabinet ministers are not about an amorphous political class. Rather, they relate to people with clearly identifiable means to further their interests. We may then research the ways in which they act collectively, in governmental and informal settings, and how their backgrounds influence their ways of thinking in such arenas.

Professionalization is also a distinct phenomenon. It relates to the payment of politicians at a level which makes it feasible to make a living from being a politician alone, removing the need to be independently wealthy or a part-time politician (Borchert, 2003, p7).

Professionalization may also relate to a larger number of roles which sustain unelected political professions, including those in think-tanks or policy bodies, political parties, and jobs within political institutions, such as working for an MP (Webb and Fisher, 2003). This expansion has resulted in a broader professionalization in the form of greater material support for politicians as they go about their work. However, as with the study of elites, we can focus on discrete topics, such as regarding how politicians exploit or try to enhance their professional system, either as individuals claiming expenses or parliaments redrawing the rules.

Careerism is the term most associated with the negative ‘political class’ image, but its meaning is not always clear. For Anthony King, the career politician is ‘committed to politics’, regards it as a ‘vocation’, and seeks fulfillment and a future from it (1983, p.250), whilst Philip Cowley (2012) uses the term implicitly to describe individuals who have worked in politics professionally prior to entering elected politics at the national level. This usage resonates with the popular criticisms of the political class. It describes membership of the political class and a determination to remain so, perhaps, in some cases, at the expense of that politician’s initially more noble desire to enter politics to turn their beliefs into policies.

Revisiting the complaints and re-operationalising the term

The main benefit of such categorization is to focus research on the areas most relevant to the negative ‘political class’ claim. In particular, the third category, careerism, may be the most worthy of further research, since it could explain most of the six claims we identified. The careerist narrative suggests that MPs get where they are by planning early: getting the right kind of education, securing politics-facilitating jobs, being willing to represent areas in which they have no roots, then securing their positions by defending the concentration of power in Westminster (by minimizing devolution to regions) and in the two main parties (by opposing electoral reform).

Yet, we wonder how many MPs can be accurately described in this way, and how we could possibly do the research to demonstrate such motivation. The push for conceptual clarity prompts us to recognize that, while we have a lot of general data on the backgrounds and activities of MPs, we do not have much evidence to back up specific aspects of the ‘political class’ claim.

Instead, if we are more specific about these complaints, we may find that elements of them describe a small political elite rather than a wider political class. First, considering the UK political class in a broad sense, including members of the devolved legislatures, local councillors, and even civil servants, it becomes clear that many of the complaints put at the door of the ‘political class’ relate to Westminster politics, and those with governing power or influence – which could include MPs as a whole, or frontbench MPs. Highlighting this distinction might help to improve perceptions of local politicians or politicians who are not complicit in the high-level policy decisions or general behaviours that are often the target of complaint.

Second, if careerism is the core plank of the negativity surrounding the ‘political class’, we should aim to analytically distinguish careerist politicians from, for example, MPs who enter politics under different circumstances. Again, although difficult to operationalize, this might be evident in the case of MPs who succeed in their bid for election from particularly marginal seats, or from highly contested selection processes, particularly for women and minority ethnic candidates. This case highlights the challenges facing researchers in these instances – is it too much of a challenge to link cause and effect in an attempt to highlight, for example, careerist attitudes, or self-serving behaviour; things that are essentially psychological in nature? Despite this, a shift in the focus of such language may prove beneficial and avoid labelling all politicians with the careerist tag.

Third, research suggests that careerist individuals tend to be more successful in achieving frontbench office than colleagues who have not had pre-legislative political experience as their main source of income (Allen, 2013). This is reflected in the number of career politicians making it into party leadership roles (King, 1983; Cowley, 2012; Barber, 2014). These individuals comprise around 15 per cent of the 2010 general election intake (Criddle, 2010). As such, when Nigel Farage rails against ‘career politicians in three parties who don’t even understand the problems [the electorate] face in their everyday lives’, he is largely referring to the political elite, not the political class broadly defined.

Being more specific allows us to offer more specific remedies. For example, an obvious way to curtail this kind of careerism is through the implementation of term limits. In this framing, the possible solution shifts from largely vague ideas of disconnect and unrepresentativeness to concrete policy proposals – and proposals that may prove to be more problematic than the problems they are designed to solve.

The same can be said for the notion of professionalization, which broadens the problem from careerists to an elected profession with a clear professional incentive to advance its interests. Professionalization is often the crux of the complaints directed at politicians – all these people do is politics, and politics gives them the financial means to maintain such a situation (Riddell, 1993; Barber, 2014). This characteristic distinguishes them from almost all other members of the population whom they notionally represent – including many members of the political class (broadly defined) who *do not* pursue politics full-time, such as many local councillors.ⁱⁱ

In this case, specifying the meaning of ‘political class’ highlights, perhaps, a desire for some kind of direct democracy, perhaps with unpaid politicians who donate their time voluntarily. As such, it allows us to think through the misconceptions regarding politics and the unintended consequences of solutions. For example, distinguishing between paid and unpaid politicians can be a false dichotomy. To quote David Plotke, ‘the opposite of representation is not participation. The opposite of representation is exclusion. And the opposite of participation is abstention’ (1997, p19). [It is not clear, on this reading, that critics of the ‘political class’ are making a complaint that is new or original in any way whatsoever.](#)

Rather, they rehearse the age-old contradictions of representative democracy, and explicit or implicit solutions that may be more easily criticised or rejected if they were stated clearly.

Conclusion

When we think through the implications of the many claims associated with ‘political class’, we find that they may relate to a small group of people often deemed to be representative of a much larger problem. The broader idea of political class seems too amorphous, even by the standards of definition generally seen in political studies. Additionally, the larger problem seems too ill-defined, with these complaints perhaps acting as a proxy for broader questions regarding the legitimate role of politicians in society. Consequently, political ‘entrepreneurs’ will continue to exploit the problem to present their pet solutions. An alternative, explored in this article, is to specify the class of people and redefine the problem, to allow us to focus research on the most fruitful areas, asking in the first instance whether or not these complaints have any factual basis, and provide data on more specific policy solutions. The broad academic literature currently framed around the notion of a political class is useful but, in the current climate of mistrust in politicians, its value might be enhanced by focusing attention rather than simply reinforcing a general feeling of political malaise through the continual and casual use of a now toxic phrase. As such, we contend that the term ‘political class’ is useful if and only if both academic and non-academic users of it are clear about precisely what they take it to mean.

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ⁱ We restrict our analysis to elected politicians. There would be many more definitions to consider if we included reference to a 'ruling class' or 'ruling elite' which includes unelected policymakers.

ⁱⁱ According to the 2013 National Census of Local Authority Councillors, just 19.2 per cent of councillors are in full-time work (Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014, p.10).