

Falling parachutes: Are politicians becoming more “local”?

REVISED – ‘Clean Version’

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British voters generally want their Member of Parliament (MPs) to be ‘local’ to their constituency¹, which can engender some electoral advantage². However, defining someone as ‘local’ is not straightforward, and may mean different things – and with a different intensity – in different parts of the country. It is also open to multiple definitions. For example, is it dependent on place of birth, schooling, residence, employment or service on the local council? Sometimes there is a dynastic link to a seat an MP’s parents or grandparents previously held³.

Controversially, political parties sometimes place a candidate into one of their safest seats (thereby enabling a long parliamentary career) who has no, or limited, connection with the district in question. They are usually promising politicians well-connected with their party machine, and this can take place over the heads of local party members⁴. The pejorative term applied to these politicians is *parachutist* (*carpetbagger* is the USA equivalent), which begs the question of who are they and how many of them are there? The challenge is one of determining universally agreeable definitions – be it of ‘local’ or ‘*parachutist*’ - given that the role of geographical distance in electoral candidate evaluations by voters and subsequent vote choice remains one of psephology’s relatively untested hypotheses², and the case for local representation is a comparatively under-researched dimension of descriptive representation⁵. This is a topic where statisticians and political scientists might usefully collaborate in the future.

Whatever approach is applied to trying to measure ‘localness’ in politicians, there will always be data constraints; both in terms of definition and availability. These in turn will influence and limit any analyses. In the circumstances, this article builds on previous research³ to examine trends in the numbers of *parachutists*. The issue primarily affects the Conservative and Labour parties because of their nationwide reach. A high-level proxy approach was adopted by investigating the relationship between MPs’ constituencies and their places of birth over the four UK general elections 2010-2019; place of birth being data that is usually available and fixed. In this regard a *parachutist* is defined as an MP who crossed more than one of the UK’s 12 standard regions’ boundaries; because Northern Ireland is separated from the rest of the United Kingdom by sea, it was deemed not adjacent to any other region in this context. The definition also addresses the fact that an MP can be very local to their constituency but have been born just over the regional border. For example, one MP for Stoke-on-Trent North was born in Congleton, a neighbouring town, just 7 miles across the North West–West Midlands boundary. Consequently, MPs born outside the UK (such as Boris Johnson) were excluded from the totals because their links with specific UK locations are varied and open to interpretation³. Therefore, it is the direction of travel rather than the absolute numbers that is most relevant.

Trends

Table 1 shows a general downward trend election-on-election in MPs crossing multiple regional boundaries. Such MPs accounted for 21.3% in 2019, despite an overall reduction of five percentage points. The sharp decline for 'Other' MPs is due to the loss of many Liberal Democrat MPs in 2015 and the large influx of SNP MPs in the same election (MPs for nationalist parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are generally native to their country).

There was a reduction of seven percentage points for Labour, with male MPs crossing multiple regional boundaries falling from 29.6% to 23.9% over the period, compared to a fall from 25.3% to 18.8% in respect of their female colleagues. During this time, the balance between male and female Labour MPs changed from 68%:32% to 49%:51%. There was no such steady trend for the Conservatives, with corresponding reductions from 25.1% to 23.9% for male MPs and 37.5% to 28.0% for females. The balance between male and female Conservative MPs changed from 84%:16% to 76%:24%.

	% MPs representing constituency multiple regional boundaries from their region of birth (Exc. Non-UK)				Total Number (Exc. Non-UK)			
	2010	2015	2017	2019	2010	2015	2017	2019
All MPs	26.5%	25.8%	25.4%	21.3%	616	617	618	614
All Conservative MPs	27.2%	29.0%	29.0%	24.9%	287	310	300	346
All Labour MPs	28.3%	27.3%	25.7%	21.3%	244	220	249	188
All Other MPs (inc Speaker)	18.8%	10.3%	8.7%	6.3%	85	87	69	80
All Female MPs	28.7%	29.1%	27.4%	21.1%	136	179	197	204
All Male MPs	25.8%	24.4%	24.5%	21.5%	480	438	421	410

Table 1. MPs representing constituency multiple regional boundaries from their region of birth, by party and sex, 2010-2019

Table 2 focuses on the turnover of MPs, showing the figures for new MPs where a seat changed hands and where a party retained a seat, together with figures for departing MPs. What is noticeable (primarily comparing 2015 with 2019) is that MPs who left Parliament were more likely to have crossed multiple regional boundaries (30.1% in 2019) than those who were re-elected (23.8%), and far more likely than new MPs (13.8%). Interestingly there was a considerable difference between newly elected MPs where the party changed hands (8.9%) and where the seat was retained (19.2%). The latter will include the 'safe' constituencies for both parties. Might this suggest that *parachuting* is still taking place to some extent?

The fact that 281 (43.2%) of constituencies were represented by the same MP in both 2010 and 2019 serves to illustrate that changes in politician mobility patterns will be evolutionary. The percentage crossing multiple regional boundaries was 28.1% (30.2% for Conservatives and 28.2% for Labour); whilst the figure for MPs elected in 2019 who were not elected to that constituency in 2010 was only 15.7%.

	% MPs representing constituency multiple regional boundaries from their region of birth (Exc. Non-UK)			Total Number (Exc. Non-UK)		
	2015	2017	2019	2015	2017	2019
All MPs who left Parliament	22.0%	18.4%	30.1%	186	98	156
Re-elected MPs	28.8%	27.0%	23.8%	430	519	462
Newly Elected MPs where Party changed	14.0%	12.1%	8.9%	107	66	79
Newly Elected MPs where seat was held	25.0%	27.3%	19.2%	80	33	73
All New MPs	18.7%	17.2%	13.8%	187	99	152
All MPs	25.8%	25.4%	21.3%	617	618	614

Table 2. MPs representing constituency multiple regional boundaries from their region of birth, by entry and exit to parliament, 2015-2019

Figure 1 shows patterns for MPs who crossed multiple regional boundaries for the different standard regions. They compare constituencies which were represented by the same MP in 2010 and 2019 with those represented by different MPs in 2010 and 2019. It serves to highlight variations between the more established MPs who will represent their parties' safer constituencies, with all MPs elected in 2019 who were elected since 2010. The X axis is the percentage of MPs in a region who crossed multiple regional boundaries from where they were born, while the Y axis is the percentage of MPs born in a region who crossed multiple regional boundaries to be elected in a constituency. It is seen that for the more established MPs 38.7% of MPs in London crossed multiple regional boundaries to represent their constituency, while 38.5% of MPs born in London crossed multiple regional boundaries to represent a constituency elsewhere in the country. As another example, the corresponding figures for the North West were 10.7% and 35.9%.

The more divergent pattern for the more established MPs suggests there is greater politician mobility amongst them, compared to the MPs elected in 2019, i.e. the latter's points being closer to (0,0) indicates that in general these MPs are more local. Regions above the diagonal will have a larger number of MPs crossing multiple regional boundaries to get elected than those incoming. Some regions are above the diagonal in both diagrams (North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland) while some were below in both (East of England, East Midlands, South East, South West). London and Yorkshire & Humber were each close to the diagonal in both diagrams. The change for Scotland is explained by the large gains made by the SNP in 2015 and subsequently.

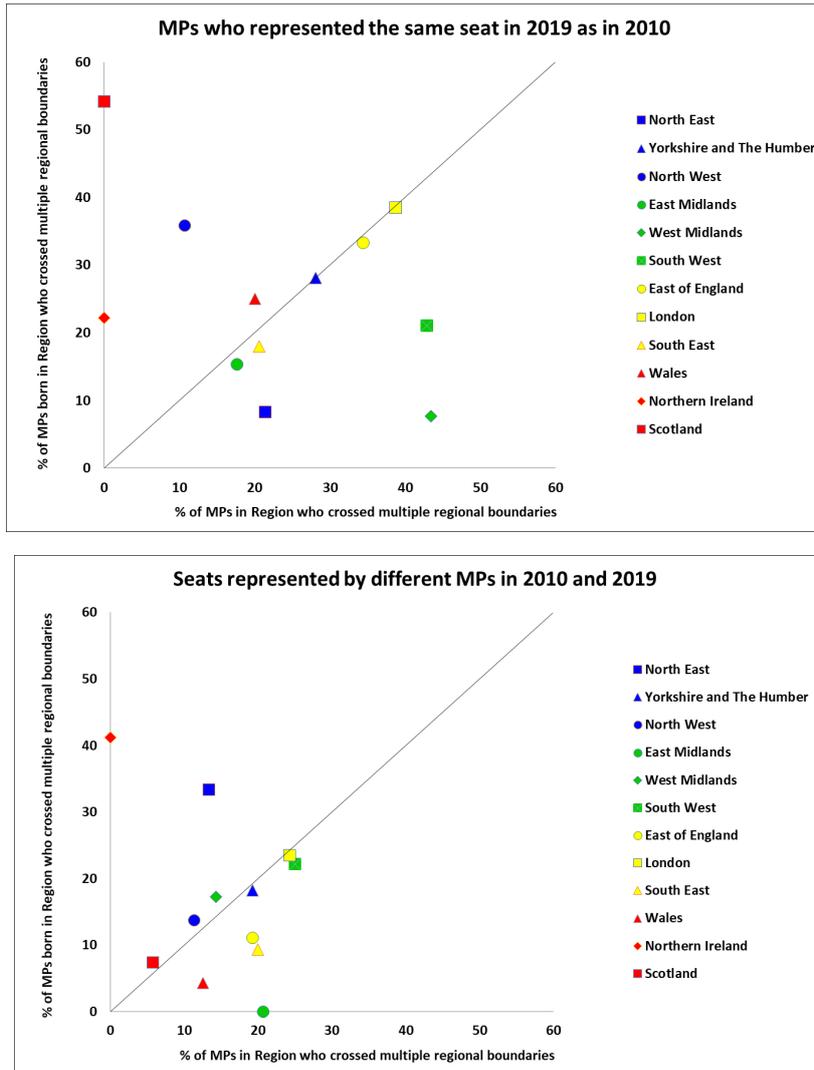


Figure 1 Comparison of MPs crossing multiple regional boundaries by region – MPs representing same seat in 2010 and 2019 with seats represented by different MPs in 2010 and 2019

Table 3 demonstrates that the age of MPs has great relevance to the analysis of where MPs were born and where they represent. Older MPs (born in the 1930s & 1940s) were far more likely to have crossed multiple regional boundaries than the youngest MPs. In general, there is something of a gradient across the decades, but with MPs born in the 1960s and 1970s having similar figures. This suggests that over time, as older MPs retire or die, they will be replaced with younger politicians, who are far less likely to have crossed multiple regional boundaries. This suggests that the general direction is for MPs to be more local to their constituencies than in the past.

	% MPs representing constituency multiple regional boundaries from their region of birth (Exc. Non-UK)				Total Number (Exc. Non-UK)			
	2010	2015	2017	2019	2010	2015	2017	2019
All MPs	26.5%	25.8%	25.4%	21.3%	616	617	618	614
MPs born in 1930s & 1940s	32.3%	31.4%	33.3%	38.9%	99	51	39	18
MPs born in 1950s	27.7%	30.9%	31.0%	27.7%	202	152	145	101
MPs born in 1960s	23.8%	25.5%	25.5%	23.2%	185	204	192	185
MPs born in 1970s	25.4%	23.4%	25.9%	21.7%	114	158	158	175
MPs born in 1980s & 1990s	12.5%	13.5%	10.7%	11.1%	16	52	84	135

Table 3. MPs representing constituency multiple regional boundaries from their region of birth, by date of birth, 2015-2019

Discussion and conclusions

The UK has fewer MPs with local roots than many European states, where the preference for local parliamentarians is so common it is often ‘considered a natural order, bordering on banality’. Arguably this is in part because, unlike some countries, the UK does not have formal residency requirements incorporated into law⁶. Therefore, *parachuting* non-local candidates into constituencies where they have little or no connection is that much easier. There are well-publicised contentious examples of the practice, which include: Londoner Luciana Berger being selected by Labour for Liverpool Wavertree (and subsequently elected as the MP) when she did not know the name of legendary Liverpool manager Bill Shankly or who sang ‘Ferry Across The Mersey’⁷; and Conservative candidates in post-2019 by-elections – Hartlepool (which the Conservatives won from Labour)⁸ and North Shropshire (a Conservative seat lost to the Liberal Democrats)⁹. An internet search provides many current and historical examples and confirms the issue applies across the globe.

There will always be complaints about the *parachuting* of candidates into constituencies, and such cases will always attract publicity; but this can draw attention away from a more widespread and countervailing trend, i.e. British MPs are becoming more local. Here we have utilised a deliberately broad proxy indicator to ascertain trends in *parachuting* politicians into favoured seats, but we are *not* saying that all MPs who have been elected to a constituency multiple regional boundaries from where they were born are all *parachutists*. MPs can be elected to constituencies far from where they were born but have local roots because, for example, their parents moved there when they were a child or they studied at the local university and subsequently found employment locally. Equally, we are not saying that an MP born locally to their constituency cannot have been parachuted into the seat; the corresponding author knows of a specific case where the candidate selected by the party’s national by-election panel was living within the constituency but was unknown to the local party because he had only been a member for six months!

This is very much a subjective issue and there is unlikely to ever be a universally agreed definition. The old adage 'I know it when I see it' might apply, but different people will see a given situation differently. Whatever the criteria and definitions used, there will be false positives and false negatives; for example, one MP believed he was born in London but was adopted immediately after birth and brought up in the Midlands where he became an MP³. It would be difficult, if not wholly inappropriate, to try and collect data on all MPs' life-stories to satisfy all potentialities. Therefore, place of birth is probably the best available, valid and robust data for the purposes described; and we argue that our approach has considerable utility, especially when trying to measure change over time. It shows evidence of a clear decrease in the percentage of British MPs who have crossed multiple regional boundaries, subject to the various caveats mentioned above. There are some obvious differences, but even though the political composition of parliament has undergone significant changes over this period, we still find election-on-election changes in this regard.

This research used the UK's standard regions as the base data for its analyses, in part because they were the constituencies for elections to the EU Parliament. Some regions are geographically large (for example, South West), and so a politician could represent a constituency up to 200 miles from where they were born, but still be within the same region. It follows that if smaller, sub-regional areas had been utilised then the number of 'local' MPs would have reduced and the number of *parachutists* increased, using exactly the same MP data. Consequently, we hope that this article can contribute to a necessary debate between psephologists, statisticians and other interested parties about what exactly might be the best definitions of 'local' and *parachutist*, and what might be the optimal (geographical) level of analysis. These terms have been bandied about for a very long time, but with varying interpretations and perspectives, no doubt influenced by the nature of data available to researchers. Creating a consensus would hopefully enable greater consistency and comparability in future related research.

In conclusion, there is an ongoing trend for MPs to be increasingly from their local region, as older MPs leave Parliament and are replaced by young politicians. Nevertheless, despite local candidates being favoured by voters, it is conjectured that parachuting will continue but likely to decline, given that it is a contentious practice which can now be readily raised and debated on social media.

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Editor's note

See significancemagazine.com/XXX for the list of references accompanying this article. [Anna Britten to decide if this is needed]

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