



Our most and least educated politicians

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Body

Explainer Cindy Yin and Julie Hare analyse the academic backgrounds of all 226 federal politicians in **Australia**, and uncover some interesting facts.

Just how educated are our federal politicians? The Greens, for example, have the highest proportion of PhDs among those who represent us at Parliament House.

The Coalition, on the other hand, has the highest proportion of members who went to a private school. But unlike the privately schooled population, who are more likely to go to university than those who go to government schools, only a small proportion of Coalition members went on to gain a degree.

The Australian Financial Review has analysed the educational backgrounds of all 226 federal politicians, which encompasses the 151 MPs and 75 senators currently in office. Are they representative of the broader population? This is what we found.

How many of our politicians

attended university? Our politicians are overall a highly educated cohort - 77 per cent have a bachelor's degree or higher.

This figure is significantly greater than the national average, with Australian Bureau of Statistics data showing just 32 per cent of all Australians have graduated from university.

So why is there a remarkably high percentage of university graduates in parliament?

Is it because people with an interest in politics or policy are more likely to go to university or is it that they get politicised while there? John Howard, when prime minister, certainly thought it was the latter, when in 2005 he banned students from automatically becoming members of the student unions because he saw it as a breeding ground for hot-headed lefties and socialists.

John Hawkins, a political historian from the University of Canberra, says the opposite is most likely the case.

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"I suspect it's the other way around; that people who are interested in political ideas and policy are more likely to want to go to university," Hawkins says.

Our analysis reveals that 83.5 per cent of Labor politicians have at least one degree compared with 68.6 per cent of Coalition members.

Paul Strangio, emeritus professor of politics at Monash University, says the prevalence of politicians with degrees in history, politics, sociology and law makes sense.

"There's a certain synchronicity. These degrees teach people analytical skills, as well as strong written and verbal communication skills. Arguably, there's a good match-up with the role of a politician," he says.

Certainly, universities are where many politicians get their first taste of politics and activism.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is one such example. He was prominent in campus politics during his time at the University of Sydney, which culminated in his presidency of NSW Young Labor and later as a rising political staffer.

Simon Birmingham, leader of the opposition in the Senate, was president of the Adelaide University Liberal Club in 1993, and part of Young Liberals in South Australia for most of the 1990s. He later became an electorate officer for Senator Robert Hill.

It goes to show that the path from student politics to staffer to MP is well-trodden.

There are countless politicians who cut their teeth in student politics. Opposition Leader Peter Dutton was chairman of the Bayside Young Liberals in 1990. As a student, Tony Burke, minister for industrial relations, was the president of Australian Young Labor. Foreign affairs minister Penny Wong was heavily involved in the Labor Club at Adelaide University and served on the national executive of the National Union of Students.

And that's just for starters.

Which universities produce

the most politicians?The institution that has produced the most of our federal politicians is the University of Sydney, closely followed by the universities of Melbourne and Queensland.

Universities in the Group of Eight (Go8) dominate the ranking, taking up eight out of 10 spots on the list.

John Hawkins makes the simple point: "These are the main universities in the states with the biggest populations."

But he adds that they are also the institutions most likely to offer degrees in law, economics, history and philosophy, and also the most likely to offer double-degrees, which are a popular choice among the political classes.

For some, however, the prevalence of degrees from Group of Eight universities is emblematic of entrenched elitism and social division in the broader population.

Glenn Savage, associate professor of education policy at the University of Melbourne, has compared Australia's "highly inequitable" education system to an "ecosystem" with flow-on effects that influence an individual's tertiary study and, ultimately, employment.

"It's natural that young people who have more advantageous circumstances will end up in more advantageous positions," he says.

What are our politicians

most likely to study?Although parliament largely consists of highly educated politicians, it's a bit more monochrome when it comes to what they studied - mostly arts and humanities.

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About 40 per cent of federal politicians studied arts at university, which was by a long shot the most popular degree. A double arts-law degree was also common, with 27 politicians, or 12 per cent, graduating with that particular combination.

Clare O'Neil, Brendan O'Connor, Bill Shorten, Michelle Rowland, Julian Leeser, Anika Wells, Zoe McKenzie, Angus Taylor, Adam Bandt and Andrew Gee are just a few of the current crop of politicians with double degrees.

There is a range of majors under the broader umbrella of arts.

Katy Gallagher studied political science and sociology. Labor frontbencher **Anne Aly** majored in English literature, with a minor in acting. Greens MP Max Chandler-Mather and transport minister Catherine King studied history and social work, respectively.

Only 20 politicians (or 9 per cent of parliament) are qualified in science or engineering. Seven studied medicine, including independents Monique Ryan and Sophie Scamps. One - Emma McBride - did pharmacy. Greens MP Elizabeth Watson-Brown is an architect.

Savage says arts degrees, in particular law, politics, and other humanities, "lend themselves very well to producing the kinds of knowledge and skill sets which would prove useful for a politician".

"These degrees would also expose students to theories into social dynamics that are of direct relevance to the political and policy process," he says.

Strangio says the lack of politicians with expertise and backgrounds in STEM "may be a disadvantage for some workings of parliament in terms of committee work, where politicians really need to get into the nitty-gritty of policy".

"However, fundamentally, it's a highly educated cohort. They probably have the skill sets in terms of research capacities and written communication skills," he says.

Gavin Moodie, adjunct professor at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, says public policy would be better served if it was "more informed by technology, science and engineering, because our current and future challenges will be scientific and technological: climate change, health, and technological change".

Only five politicians have studied education. These include Sue Lines, president of the Senate, as well as Labor MP Ged Kearney.

Who are our most educated

politicians?Proportionally, the Greens are the most formally educated party overall, with three out of 15 party members - 20 per cent - holding PhDs.

Adam Bandt completed his PhD in political science at Monash while working part-time at law firm Slater & Gordon. His thesis was "Work to Rule: Rethinking Pashukanis, Marx and Law".

There are seven Labor politicians with PhDs - or 6.8 per cent of the party. Treasurer Jim Chalmers wrote his thesis on former prime minister Paul Keating, titled "Brawler statesman: Paul Keating and prime ministerial leadership in **Australia**".

Others Labor PhD holders include **Anne Aly**, Andrew Charlton, Andrew Leigh and Daniel Mulino.

Independent Helen Haines and Nationals MP Anne Webster also hold PhDs.

In total, the percentage of federal politicians with a PhD is 5.4 per cent - much higher than the 0.7 per cent of the Australian population (185,000 people) with PhDs.

Strangio says that having highly educated politicians is a good thing.

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"Legislation is complex. The issues they are dealing with are complex, and higher education can be an advantage."

Who are our least educated

politicians? It turns out that higher education is not the only way to become a politician - a sizeable chunk of politicians choose an alternate pathway to Parliament House. Almost one in four politicians (23 per cent) did not graduate from university, and 3 per cent never finished high school.

The least formally educated politicians come from the Coalition, with some entering the workforce as teenagers. This is despite the majority of them attending private schools.

Warren Entsch, left school at age 14, following his father into the Queensland railway department as a junior porter. Entsch was originally tasked with being the chief toilet cleaner of the Mareeba railway station.

West Australian senator Dorinda Cox joined the WA police force as a cadet at age 17. She was an Aboriginal police liaison officer working on the frontlines, specialising in family violence and sexual assault.

David Pocock became a professional footballer at age 17, Rob Mitchell left after year 10 to do a shoe-making apprenticeship, and Luke Howarth has a certificate III in pest management and a diploma in business.

Dr Sally Patfield, a lecturer at the University of Newcastle's School of Education, says having a range of educational backgrounds in parliament is beneficial.

"Politicians bring a diverse range of perspectives and opinions both in terms of their own background, and the people they represent in Australia. It's important to have these experiences being represented, as it is more reflective of the Australian population," she says.

Hawkins, however, says it is reassuring to have a political cohort that is more educated than the general population. "You would want them to be smarter than the general public. Ideally, you'd want them to be more honest and trustworthy as well," Hawkins says.

Where did our politicians

go to school? Almost three in five politicians (57 per cent) were educated at private schools. In comparison, ABS data shows that 36 per cent of all students across Australia are enrolled in independent or private schools.

Just one politician - Greens senator Jordon Steele-John - was homeschooled.

Are there any conclusions to be drawn from this? Howarth says it shows how old-fashioned notions of the make-up of political parties no longer hold true. "Labor has traditionally been seen as the party of blue-collar workers, while the Liberals were seen as posh private school kids. That's increasingly not the case." AFR

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