

MPs with slim majorities and frontbenchers are the most prolific parliamentary tweeters

By Democratic Audit

*A clear majority of Members of Parliament are now on Twitter, with over 400 MPs tweeting. **James Donald** has studied this phenomenon, with research into which MPs tend to be on Twitter – considering age, party membership, electoral majorities and other factors – and what exactly they are using it for. In this post he sets out his findings.*

As of January this year, 408 MPs have Twitter accounts, with 242 still not yet tweeting.

There are multiple factors that may help explain whether or not an MP tweets. Firstly, there is a clear disparity between MPs

according to

age and longevity. Younger and more recently-elected MPs are far more likely to tweet than older MPs and those who have been in office for longer. Those MPs elected at the 2010 general election are the most likely to tweet, with 77% of them using Twitter. The intake of every parliament since 1983 proportionately has more MPs using Twitter than the last, the only exception being slightly more of the 1992 intake using Twitter than the 1997 intake (56% compared to 52%). All of this suggests that in the future, as older MPs retire and new, younger ones are elected, the total number of MPs using Twitter is going to go up.

Chart One: MPs' use of Twitter by age



Many MPs are informing constituents of their views and activities via Twitter. Credit: Pete Souza (public domain)

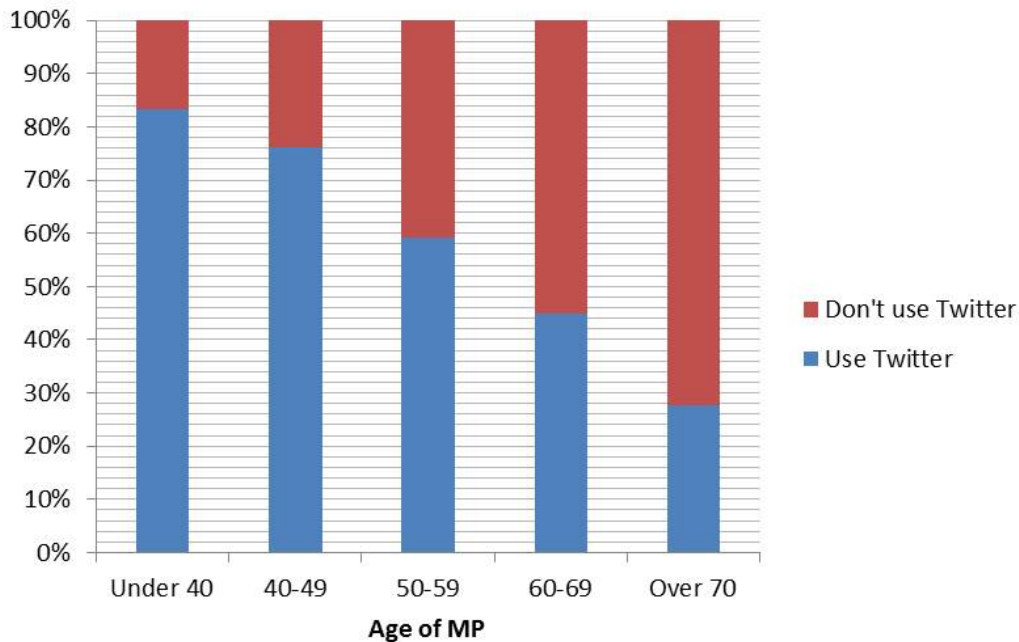


Chart Two: MPs' use of Twitter by date of election

Considering the size of MPs' majorities, we can see whether MPs defending a small majority are more likely to tweet than those with a safe seat. This appears to be the case. MPs with a majority of under 5% are the most likely to tweet, with 81% of them doing so. Those with a majority between 5 and 10% are the group with the next highest proportion tweeting, on 73%. Those with majorities of over 30% are the least likely to tweet: fewer than 60% of MPs with such a majority tweet.

Chart Three: MPs' use of Twitter by size of majority

Which parties are tweeting?

Conservative MPs appear to tweet less than those from other parties. As of January this year, 55% of Conservative MPs were tweeting. This is significantly less than the 69% of Labour MPs and 75% of Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives certainly look to be lagging behind the two other parties. It seems to be viewed with suspicion amongst the party's leadership, with David Cameron once infamously claiming '[too many tweets make a twat](#)' and reported attempts to [restrict their MPs' use of it](#).

Further insight into this trend is gained by considering the differences between frontbench and backbench MPs. Across the House of Commons as a whole, frontbenchers are more likely to tweet than backbenchers. This is true for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, but for the Conservatives this is reversed: backbenchers are more likely to tweet than frontbenchers. Indeed, while there is a large difference between the number of Labour and Conservative frontbenchers who tweet, there is little difference between the backbenchers with 56% of Labour backbenchers and 59% of Conservative backbenchers tweeting.

Chart Four: MPs' use of Twitter by party and frontbench/backbench status

What do MPs tweet?

To understand what MPs are tweeting about, I took a random sample of 40 MPs who tweet, and coded their most recent 200 tweets. Tweets were analysed according to their content (international, national, constituency or non-political topics) and the type of tweet (broadcasting news or opinion, engaging in conversation, and so on).

64% of the tweets sampled were on national issues, by far the most common topic. The second most common topic was MPs' constituencies at 20%, whilst non-political tweets accounted for 14.7% and ones on international issues just 1.3%. Unsurprisingly a recurring topic is the economy, with MPs regularly attacking the opposing parties. Often Twitter simply appeared to act as an echo chamber, with MPs repeating what was being said by their party in the news or in the House of Commons.

Chart Five: Content of MPs' tweets (sample)

Considering the type of tweets posted, the main point of interest is whether MPs were communicating with the public much. 29% of the tweets sampled were communication with other users using Twitter's '@' function. Some of these were conversations with fellow MPs and journalists, but a large number were with members of the public.

Chart Six: Types of MPs' tweets (sample)

It has been suggested that the internet and social media could herald a new relationship between elected representatives and the public, and there is certainly a willingness to interact and respond to people from a good number of MPs. However, this willingness varies from MP to MP and there are still over 200 who do not use Twitter at all. If there is a new relationship forming, it is still in its very early stages.

Note: This post is a summary of research first published in three parts on the [Ballots & Bullets blog](#) from the University of Nottingham. Data was collected in January 2013. This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics.

About the author

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