STUDY

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Who Does (Not) Have a Seat in the Latvian Saeima?

Unequal Democracies

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Contents

Why does equal representation matter?

The concept of political representation is multifaceted, and democracies differ in how they understand what it means for elected officials to "represent the people." Classic scholarship distinguishes between formal authorization through elections, symbolic recognition, descriptive resemblance, and substantive action on behalf of shared interests (Pitkin, 1967). Among these dimensions, descriptive representation – referring to the extent to which elected bodies mirror the demographic and social structure of society – has become an increasingly important benchmark for assessing democratic quality. While descriptive representation does not replace substantive representation or policy responsiveness, it can strengthen democratic decision-making by ensuring that diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and social positions are present within political institutions.

Contemporary theories further emphasize that political authority is exercised not only through direct voter delegation within a principal–agent framework, but also through anticipatory, promissory, and other representative roles that reflect the complexity of modern pluralistic societies (Mansbridge, 2011). Some scholars argue that party affiliation plays a more decisive role than social background in shaping politicians' preferences and alignment with voters (Hahn, 2024). Yet despite this conceptual richness, one normative insight remains constant: **when certain groups are persistently absent from political institutions, political equality is weakened**. Representation gaps – systematic mismatches between the composition of parliament and the population – can undermine trust, responsiveness, and legitimacy, particularly where confidence in political institutions is already fragile. Descriptive representation matters most where social groups differ not only demographically, but also in their lived experiences, political priorities, and levels of trust in institutions; in such contexts, persistent absence from parliament can become a substantive democratic problem, not merely a statistical imbalance.

Latvia exemplifies this broader democratic challenge. Trust in parliament and political parties remains among the lowest in the European Union, and public debate increasingly highlights concerns about political distance, elite reproduction, and uneven participation across social groups. Recent survey data reinforce these concerns:

> *76.4 % of respondents agree that "people like them have no influence over what the Saeima and government do".*
>
> *(SKDS, 2025)*

Such perceptions point to a deep sense of political disconnection and raise questions about whether parliamentary institutions are experienced as inclusive, responsive, and socially representative. In this context, assessing how closely the Saeima reflects the social structure of Latvian society is both analytically important and normatively essential.

This report addresses these issues by examining four key dimensions of descriptive representation – age, gender, education, social class – and by analysing political career background as a recruitment pathway that helps explain how these representational patterns are produced. The report proceeds as follows: it first outlines the institutional framework of parliamentary elections, then evaluates representativeness across these four dimensions, examines recruitment and career trajectories shaping parliamentary composition, and concludes with recommendations for strengthening representational fairness and democratic responsiveness in Latvia.

The political composition of the Saeima

Latvia's parliament, the Saeima, consists of 100 members elected for a four-year term through general, equal, direct, secret, and proportional elections, as stipulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. The electoral system is based on open-list proportional representation with a 5% national threshold that parties or party alliances must surpass to enter parliament. The country is divided into five multi-member constituencies – Riga, Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale, and Kurzeme – with seats allocated proportionally according to the number of registered voters in each district.

Voters cast ballots for party lists but may also express preferences for individual candidates by marking support or disapproval. These preference votes directly influence the order in which candidates are elected from each list. Seats are distributed using the Sainte-Laguë method, ensuring a high degree of proportionality. Voting is not compulsory. Candidates must be at least 21 years old, while the minimum voting age is 18.

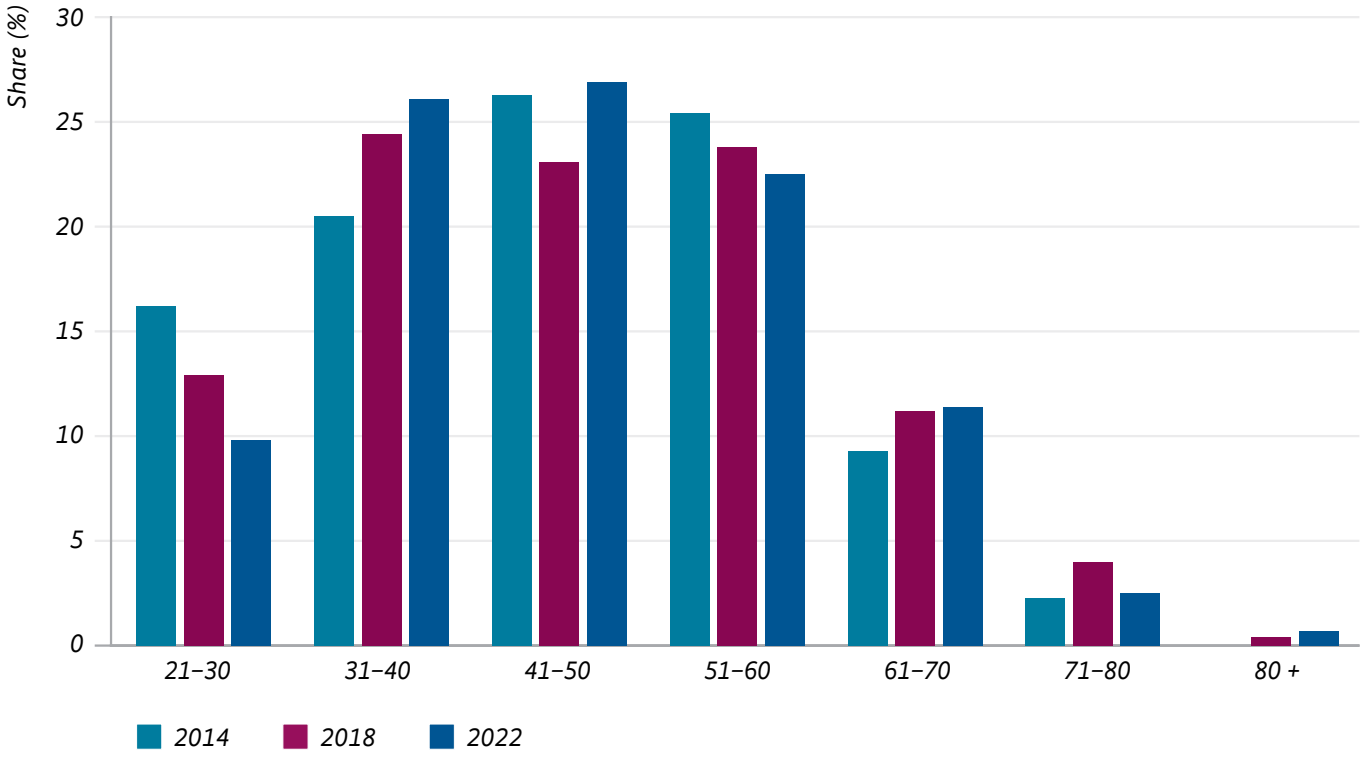
Over the past three elections, electoral competition has steadily increased, reaching 18.3 candidates per seat in 2022, with 19 party lists participating.

Men consistently outnumber women among candidates by approximately 32%.

In terms of age distribution, most active candidates are between 31 and 50 years old, while older individuals are less likely to run. Participation among younger candidates has declined significantly: whereas around 16.2% of candidates were aged 21–30 in 2014, this share dropped to 9.8% in the most recent elections (Figure 1). A strong majority of candidates are highly educated, with 74.6% holding a higher education degree in 2022.

Figure 1

Election candidates by age



Source: Data collected by the author

The current parliament

Following the 2022 parliamentary elections, seven party lists surpassed the 5 % threshold and entered the Saeima. The largest share of seats was won by the party *New Unity*, led by the sitting prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš, securing 26 out of 100 seats. Other parties obtained significantly fewer seats: the *Union of Greens and Farmers* and the *Progressives* each secured 16 seats, the *United List* 15, and the *National Alliance* 13, while *Latvia First* received the smallest representation with 9 seats (Table 1).

After the election, the incumbent Prime Minister's party *New Unity (JV)* formed a government together with the *United List (AS)* and the *National Alliance (NA)*. This government, however, remained in office for just over a year. Following a government crisis, a new coalition was formed under Prime Minister Evika Siliņa, again led by *New Unity* but now including the *Progressives (P)* and the *Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)*.[1] This coalition commands a narrow majority of 51 votes and relies on additional support from independent MPs, making decision-making more complex and less predictable.

Latvia First (LPV) and *For Stability! (S!)* currently sit in opposition, though their political trajectories differ. While public support for *Latvia First* has increased in recent surveys, *For Stability!* has experienced significant internal fragmentation: seven of its eleven elected MPs have left the parliamentary faction and now serve as unaffiliated members of parliament, as the faction's collapse. According to parliamentary rules, a faction must consist of at least five MPs elected from the same list, and members are not permitted to switch factions or join another.

Nearly one-fifth of all MPs (17 out of 100) are currently unaffiliated, having left the party under which they were originally elected. Some of these deputies align informally with other parties in voting behaviour, but legal restrictions prevent them from formally joining another faction. With regards to democratic representation, this situation also raises the important question of whom these deputies ultimately represent.

Table 1

Composition of Latvian Parliament (Saeima)

Party	Original name and acronym	Number of mandates after 2022 Elections	Number of mandates in February 2026	Governing status (2022–2023)	Governing status (2023–2026)
New Unity	"Jaunā Vienotība" (JV)	26	25	Government	Government
Greens and Farmers Union	Zaļo un zemnieku savienība (ZZS)	16	16	Opposition	Government
The United List Latvian Green Party, the Latvian Association of Regions, and the Liepaja Party.	"Apvienotais saraksts" – Latvijas Zaļā partija, Latvijas Reģionu Apvienība, Liepājas partija (AS)	15	13	Government	Opposition
The National Alliance All for Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK (NA).	Nacionālā apvienība "Visu Latvijai!" – "Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK" (NA)	13	12	Government	Opposition
For Stability!	"Stabilitātei!" (S!)	11	5	Opposition	Opposition
Progressives	"Progresīvie" (P)	10	4	Opposition	Government
Latvia First	"Latvija pirmajā vietā" (LPV)	9	8	Opposition	Opposition
Unaffiliated members of parliament	Pie frakcijām nepiederoši deputāti		17		

Source: Data collected by the author

1 The cut-off date for the data collection was 1 May 2026. Consequently, the analysis does not reflect the change in government following the resignation of Prime Minister Evika Siliņa (New Unity) on 14 May 2026, nor the formation of the subsequent government led by Andris Kulbergis (United List).

Who Sits in the Saeima? A Closer Look

Missing Generations in the Saeima

The age profile of the Latvian parliament is strongly skewed toward middle-aged representatives. Deputies in their thirties, forties, and fifties dominate the Saeima, occupying the majority of seats, despite these groups constituting only a moderate share of the adult population. By contrast, younger adults are almost entirely absent from parliament, even though they represent a larger proportion of society. A similar imbalance appears at the upper end of the age spectrum: individuals in their early sixties are represented roughly in proportion to their population share, while those aged over 70 holds only a small number of seats (Figure 2).

Overall, parliamentary representation in Latvia is concentrated in the middle stages of the life cycle, with a median MP age of 48. Both younger and older citizens remain significantly underrepresented in legislative decision-making. This imbalance would appear even more pronounced if individuals aged 18–20 – who have active voting rights but not passive, hence are not eligible to run for office – were included in the comparison.

A Gender Gap in Power

Although women constitute 55 % of the adult population (aged 21+), they hold only 30 % of seats in the Latvian parliament, resulting in a 25-percentage-point underrepresentation. This reveals a substantial misalignment between the demographic composition of the adult population and its reflection in elected office (Figure 3). Notably, the Speaker of Parliament is a woman, and 5 out of 16 parliamentary committees are chaired by women.

> *Conversely, men – who make up 45 % of the adult population – occupy 70 % of seats, indicating significant overrepresentation.*

This imbalance suggests that the gender gap in political representation cannot be explained by demographic factors alone, but rather reflects systemic disparities in political recruitment, participation, and electoral outcomes.

At the party level, there is considerable variation in both the share of female candidates and their electoral success. Parties such as *S!* and *P* demonstrate relatively proportional outcomes, with the proportion of women elected closely matching their share among candidates (Figure 4). In contrast, *NA* and *AS* show notable discrepancies: although women account for 27.0 % and 33.9 % of their candidate lists respectively, only 15.4 % and 13.3 % of their elected representatives are women. This pattern points to potential barriers related to candidate ranking, list placement, or voter preferences that disproportionately disadvantage female candidates. Only *JV* exhibits a reverse trend, electing a slightly higher proportion of women (42.3 %) than their share among candidates (36.5 %), suggesting a comparatively more inclusive electoral dynamic.

Overall, these findings highlight a multi-layered gender representation gap shaped by both structural and party-specific factors. Despite women forming a numerical majority in the electorate, this advantage does not translate into proportional political representation, underscoring the need for closer examination of party practices and societal attitudes toward female political leadership.

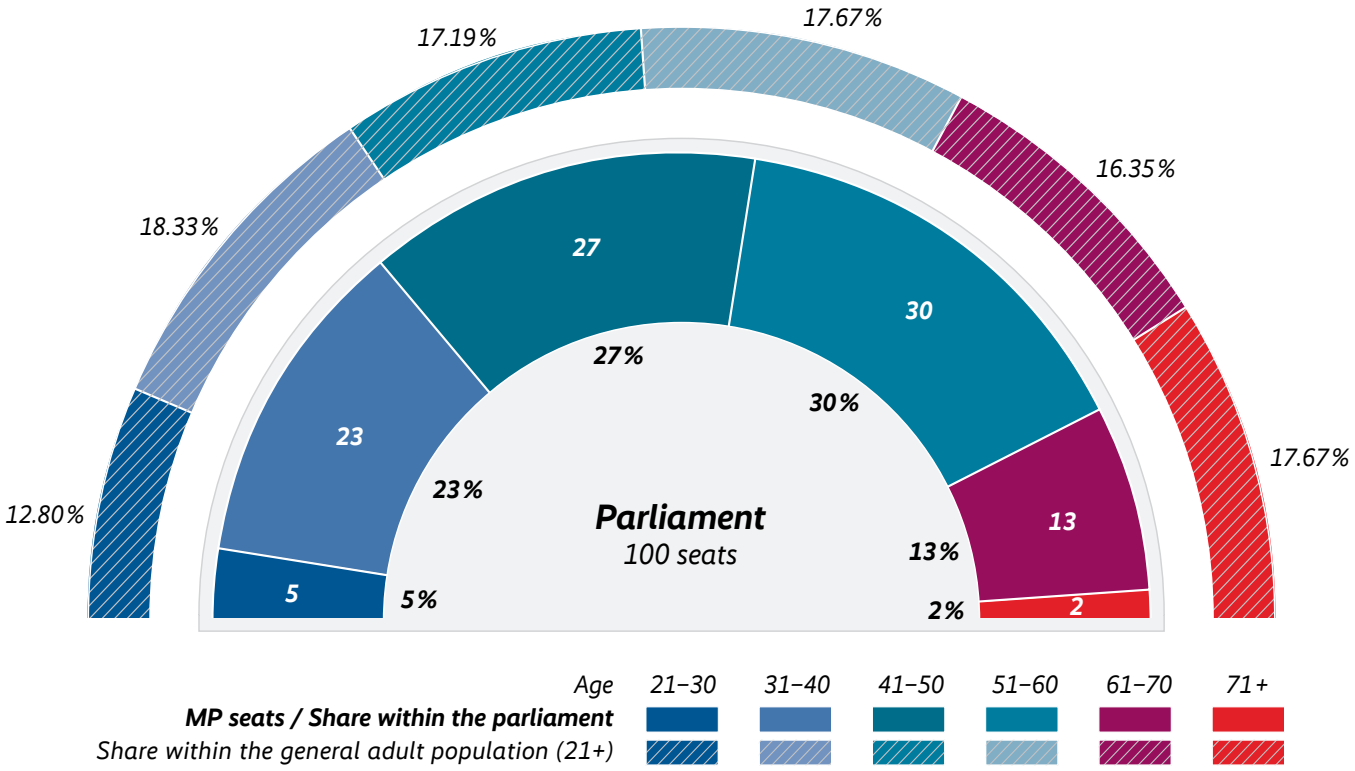
No path into parliament without a degree

The current parliament exhibits a strong concentration of higher educational attainment. Half of all MPs hold a Master's degree, 29 possess a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6), and 11 have doctoral-level qualifications (ISCED 8). In contrast, only a small number of deputies have lower levels of formal education: eight members completed upper secondary education (ISCED 3) or short-cycle tertiary qualifications (ISCED 5). This distribution points to a **highly credentialed legislatur**e compared with the general population, of which only 30.3 % have higher education qualifications (ISCED 5–8) (Figure 5).

Differences across party lists suggest some variation: opposition parties tend to display more diverse educational profiles, including a higher share of MPs whose highest qualification is upper secondary education (ISCED 3). This may make parliament somewhat more reflective of the wider population, including voters without tertiary education, and thereby increase its representational diversity. At the same time, this pattern may also resonate with the broader social bases of some populist or anti-establishment parties, whose support often draws disproportionately – though not exclusively – from voters with lower levels of formal education, weaker trust in political institutions, and a stronger sense of social or economic marginalisation.

Figure 2

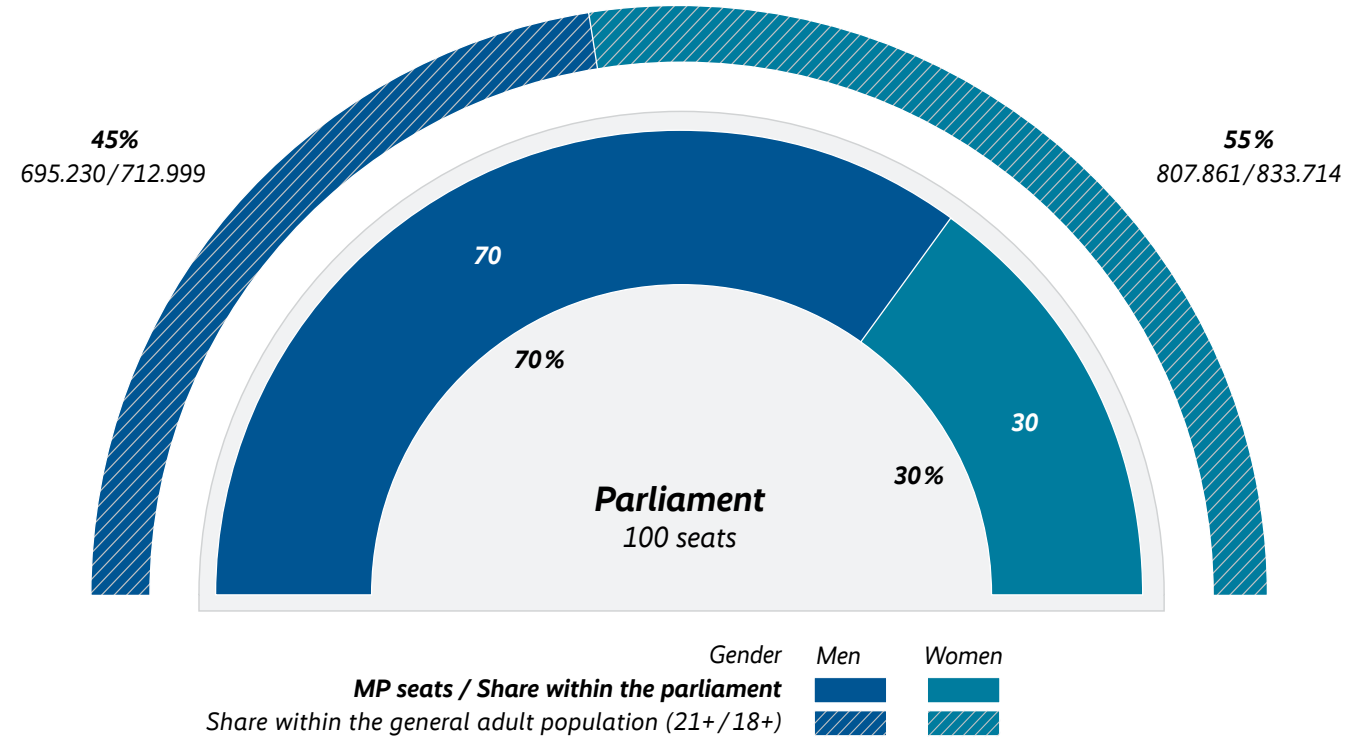
Age representation in the Latvian Parliament



Source: Author's calculations using data from the Central Election Commission and the Central Statistical Bureau.

Figure 3

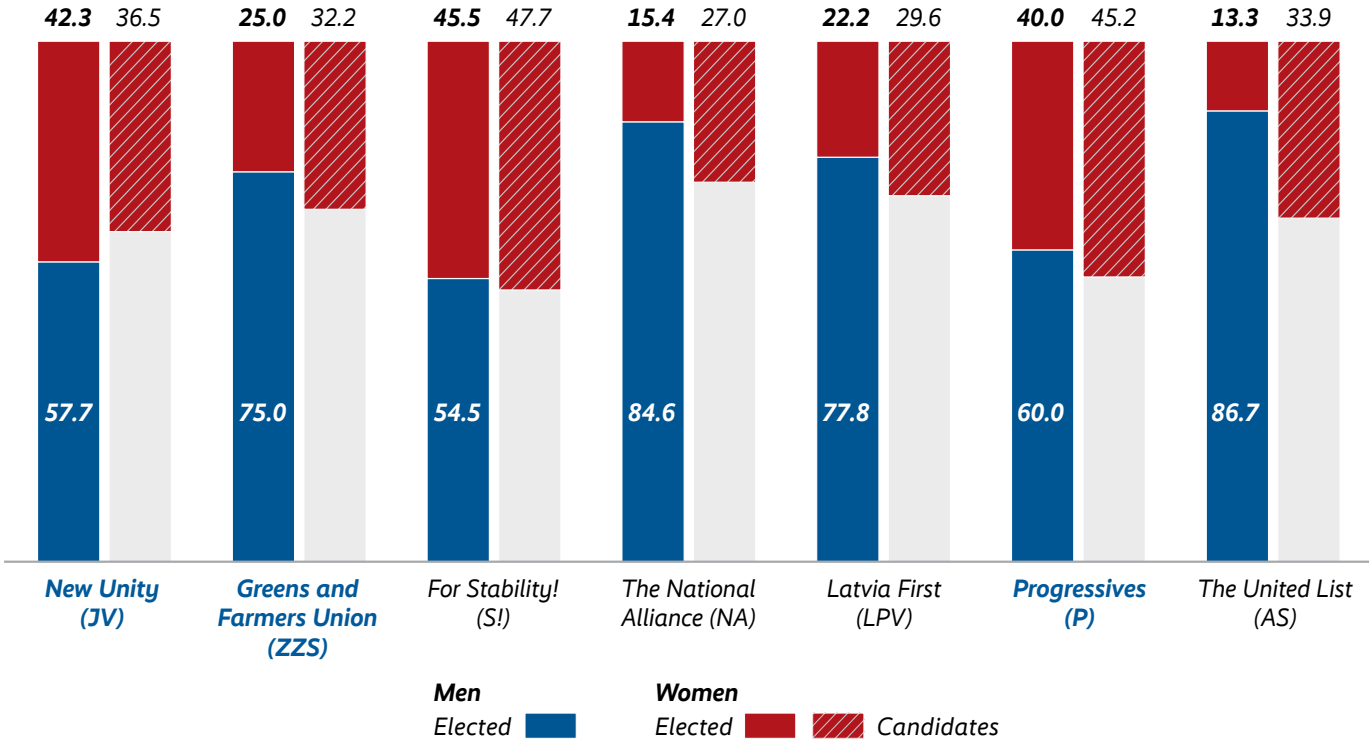
Gender representation in the Latvian Parliament



Source: Author's calculations using data from the Central Election Commission and the Central Statistical Bureau.

Figure 4

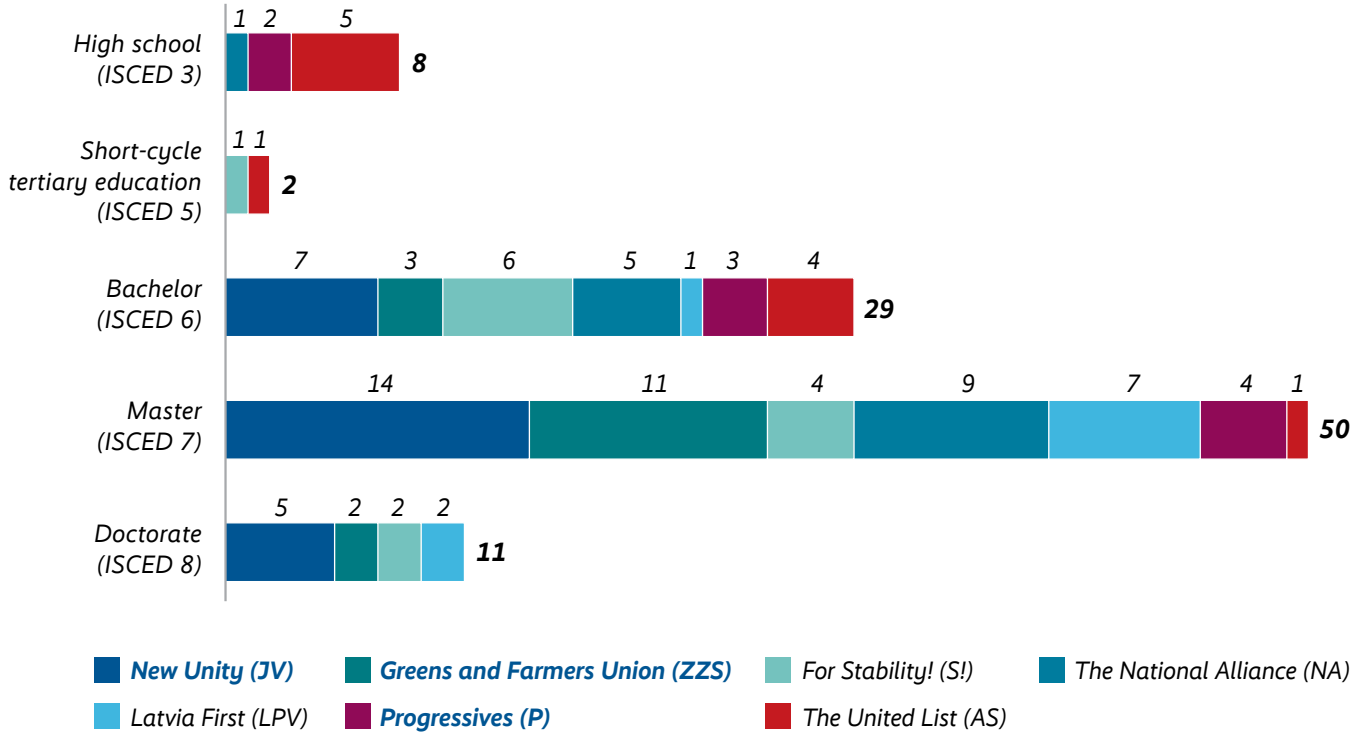
Gender representation in the Latvian Parliament by party list



Note: Bold blue letters indicate a party in government
Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission

Figure 5

The education level of representatives in the Latvian Parliament



Note: Bold blue letters indicate a party in government
Source: Data collected by the author

What social classes are missing in the Saeima?

To assess the social composition of parliament, the last occupation held by each MP prior to entering the legislature was identified and classified using Oesch's class schema (Oesch, 2006 (Table 2). This approach allows for comparison based on both the type of work performed and the level of qualifications required, offering a structured view of MPs' professional backgrounds.

Oesch's classification distinguishes several key groups, including higher-grade service occupations (such as university-educated professionals and managers), lower-grade service and semi-professional roles, and skilled or unskilled manual workers. It also includes small business owners, differentiating between employers and the self-employed. As illustrated in Figure 6, the Saeima is overwhelmingly dominated by the higher-grade service class, which accounts for 81% of all MPs.

A closer look at this dominant group (Figure 7) shows that most MPs come from administrative and managerial backgrounds. With 63 members, higher-grade managers constitute by far the largest subgroup, indicating that Latvia's political elite is primarily drawn from senior administrative and leadership positions. In contrast, sociocultural experts – such as academics, teachers, and physicians – are represented by only 11 MPs. Independent professions, including lawyers and self-employed specialists, account for just 6 members.

Other occupational groups are nearly absent: large employers and technical experts (e.g., engineers or IT specialists) are weakly represented in parliament, by only 1 MPs respectively. Overall, the pattern reflects a political elite that is heavily concentrated in administrative leadership roles, with relatively narrow professional diversity even within the upper service class. The issue is not the presence of highly educated professionals in parliament as such, but the near absence of other forms of social experience – vocational, manual, service-sector, technical, and lower-income backgrounds – which limits the range of perspectives available in legislative debate.

Table 2

Oesch Class scheme of 16 occupational classes

	Employees			Self-Employed	
	Administrative work logic	**Interpersonal work logic**	**Technical work logic**	**Independent work logic**	
Upper service class	**Higher-grade managers** accountants, senior ministry officials, advertising professionals	**Sociocultural experts** secondary school teachers, physicians, university teachers	**Technical experts** engineers, IT experts	**Independent professions** lawyers, practicing physicians, independent consultants	**Large employers** managers, business owners, farmers
Lower-grade service class	**Lower-grade managers** skilled administrative staff, skilled commercial professions	**Sociocultural professions** social workers, elementary school teachers	**Technical semi-professions** skilled workers in engineering professions, medical technicians	**Small business owners with employees**	
Working class	**Skilled clerks** skilled secretaries, warehouse clerks	**Skilled service providers** salespersons, preschool teachers, practical nurses	**Skilled crafts workers** electricians, building electricians	**Small business owners without employees**	
	Routine office clerks call-centre agents	**Routine service providers** bartenders, cleaning professions, security professions	**Routine skilled workers** machinery operators, freight professions		

Source: Elsässer & Schäfer (2022)

Figure 6

Class composition in Saeima (2022)

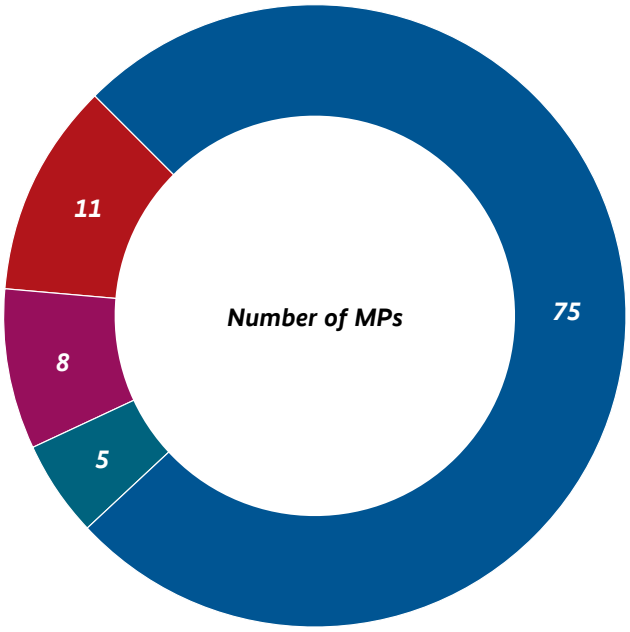
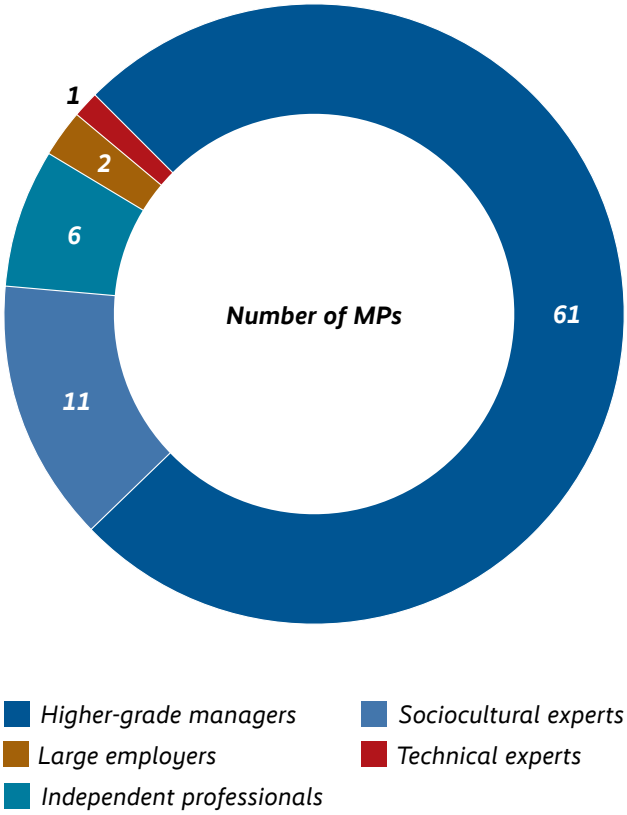


Figure 7

Types of jobs of upper service class MPs



Sources: Data collected by the author

This dominance of elite occupational backgrounds is evident across most parties. With the exception of *S!*, party lists are overwhelmingly composed of individuals from upper service occupations – managers, administrators, sociocultural professionals, and self-employed professionals. This indicates that candidate recruitment in Latvia is largely drawn from public-sector administrators, senior managers, highly educated professionals, and political insiders. Representation of working-class and lower service occupations remains minimal, with very few candidates originating from skilled manual, clerical, or service-sector backgrounds.

From local office to national power

The observed class patterns point to a recruitment system that privileges individuals from a relatively narrow occupational base. Career trajectories further reinforce this selectivity. Approximately 26 % of MPs can be classified as career politicians, while an additional 52 % had accumulated prior political or politically appointed experience before entering the Saeima – such as service in local councils, municipal executive positions, ministerial or prime ministerial offices, or roles as parliamentary secretaries.

In total, nearly four-fifths of MPs have advanced to parliament through established political pathways.

This pattern highlights the extent to which national politics in Latvia functions as a self-reproducing professional field rather than an open arena accessible to individuals from diverse occupational backgrounds. Local government emerges as the most significant recruitment channel, effectively serving as a structured apprenticeship system and the primary gateway to parliamentary careers. This narrow recruitment pattern is reinforced by the limited social rootedness of parties as membership-based organisations: in 2025, only around 24,000 people belonged to political parties in Latvia, amounting to 1.6 % of eligible voters – roughly three times below the European average (Ikstens, 2026).

The cost of an unrepresentative parliament

The concentration of political power among highly educated, middle-aged individuals from higher-grade service class backgrounds has important implications for democratic responsiveness and public trust. When the composition of parliament does not reflect the social, occupational, gender, and age diversity of the broader population, policy outcomes are more likely to align with the preferences and perspectives of overrepresented groups.

This imbalance can narrow the policy agenda, privileging administrative, technocratic, and managerial viewpoints while marginalizing issues particularly relevant to younger people, women, lower-income groups, and individuals without advanced education. As a result, parliament may be less capable of recognizing and addressing the needs of underrepresented groups, weakening responsiveness in key areas such as social protection, labour regulation, housing affordability, and youth well-being.

Over time, visible inequalities in access to political office risk undermining public trust in democratic institutions. Citizens may perceive parliament as socially exclusive, unrepresentative, and disconnected from everyday concerns. This legitimacy gap is especially pronounced among groups that are systematically excluded from political recruitment pathways, reinforcing feelings of political distance and discouraging engagement.

These dynamics are reflected in **Latvia's comparatively low levels of institutional trust.**

> *Only around 28 % of residents express trust in parliament, compared to significantly higher levels – often between 66 % and 80 % – in many other EU member states*
>
> *(Eurobarometer 2025).*

Trust in political parties is even lower, at approximately 18 %, making distrust a defining feature of Latvia's political landscape.

Electoral participation mirrors electoral representation

Representational gaps in parliament are mirrored by inequalities on the voter side. Electoral participation in Latvia is strongly shaped by age, education, income, and ethnolinguistic background. Older, more educated, and higher-income citizens consistently vote at higher rates, while younger individuals, lower-income groups, and those with lower levels of education – who are also underrepresented in parliament – are less likely to participate. Russian-speaking voters, in particular, report lower levels of political efficacy and trust, further widening the representational divide (Stafecka, 2026).

As a result, the same groups that are underrepresented in political recruitment are also less likely to vote, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which unequal participation and unequal representation mutually sustain one another, ultimately constraining democratic responsiveness. These gaps matter because recruitment patterns shape not only who enters parliament, but also which problems are recognized as politically urgent, which forms of expertise are valued, and which citizens come to see parliament as a place where people like them can exercise power.

Toward a More Inclusive Saeima

The findings of this report reveal a parliament whose social profile diverges significantly from the demographic and occupational structure of Latvian society. Across all key dimensions of descriptive representation – age, gender, education, and social class – the Saeima is dominated by highly educated, middle-aged men from the upper service class. In contrast, younger cohorts, women, individuals with lower levels of educational attainment, and those from working-class, lower-grade service class or technical professions remain substantially underrepresented. Although party lists vary in the degree of imbalance, the overall composition indicates that parliamentary elites are drawn from a narrow socio-professional stratum, with administrative managers, professionals, and long-standing political insiders comprising the majority of MPs.

Recruitment patterns further reinforce these disparities. Approximately 26 % of deputies can be classified as career politicians, while an additional 52 % held political or politically appointed roles prior to election. This indicates that prior political experience – rather than occupational diversity – remains the primary pathway into the Saeima. These representational imbalances are compounded by persistently low levels of public trust in both parliament and political parties, which weaken institutional legitimacy and discourage participation among groups already underrepresented in the political elite. As a result, unequal recruitment and unequal participation reinforce one another, sustaining a cycle of political exclusion that constrains democratic responsiveness.

At the same time, the findings suggest that targeted reforms could help broaden representation and strengthen the link between political institutions and society. The recommendations that follow therefore focus on three connected stages of representation: widening the social base from which parties recruit, making candidate selection more transparent and attentive to representational diversity, and ensuring that underrepresented groups have more consequential channels into parliamentary work.

First, political parties should broaden their social base by expanding membership, strengthening their organizational structures, and investing in more active regional branches. Low party membership and weak public trust in parties create a difficult starting point for more inclusive recruitment, but they also underline why parties need to become more socially rooted, open, and accessible organizations. Stronger regional branches would help parties identify and support potential candidates beyond Riga-based political and administrative networks, while a broader and more diverse membership base would make efforts to diversify candidate lists more credible and sustainable.

Second, political parties should make candidate selection more transparent and more explicitly oriented toward representational diversity. Broader membership and stronger regional structures will matter only if they are translated into electoral lists through clear ranking criteria, regular monitoring of candidate profiles, and stronger internal commitments to balanced representation across gender, age, education, and occupational background. Public funding mechanisms could further incentivize parties to demonstrate measurable efforts to diversify their candidate lists, rather than leaving inclusion as a purely voluntary commitment.

Third, the Saeima should strengthen its responsiveness to underrepresented groups by embedding representational concerns more systematically into committee work. Improving descriptive representation depends primarily on who parties recruit and voters elect, but parliamentary institutions can still reduce the risk that the interests of less represented groups are marginalized in day-to-day legislative work. Relevant committees should more systematically assess how proposed legislation affects groups that are weakly represented in parliament, draw on evidence and hearings from affected constituencies, and make their follow-up more visible. Existing initiatives such as the Youth Saeima and Seniors' Day could support this process, but should not remain mainly symbolic: their conclusions and resolutions should be reviewed in relevant committees and, where appropriate, reflected in the parliamentary agenda.

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Who Does (Not) Have a Seat in the Latvian Saeima?

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Why does the composition of the Saeima matter? Who sits in parliament shapes how people feel about politics. In Latvia, trust in parliament and political parties is among the lowest in the EU. The Saeima currently doesn't reflect society—whether in age, gender, education, or social background—thus making it more likely that people feel left out. A parliament that better reflects the population can better understand people's concerns, communicate more effectively, and build trust.

→

Who does (not) have a seat in the Saeima? Latvia's parliament is dominated by a fairly narrow group: mostly middle-aged, highly educated men from professional, managerial, or political backgrounds. At the same time, younger people, women (especially in some parties), people with lower levels of education, and those from working-class or technical jobs are much less well represented. While there are some differences between parties, overall, the path into parliament tends to favour people with similar profiles—often those who already have political experience.

→

What should be done? Making parliament more representative starts with stronger, more socially rooted political parties. Parties need to broaden their membership, strengthen regional branches, and open clearer pathways for people from underrepresented groups. Candidate selection should become more transparent and attentive to diversity. At the same time, rebuilding trust between citizens, parties, and parliament is a crucial precondition for making representation more inclusive and politically meaningful.

You can find further information on this topic here:
↗ **democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy.html**

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