

PRESS RELEASE

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FUTURE MPs AGREE TO TAKE STATISTICS TRAINING

Hundreds of election candidates have signed up to be trained in the accurate use of statistics if they become MPs, following a high profile lobbying campaign by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS).

More than 220 House of Commons hopefuls have now backed the Society's #ParliamentCounts campaign, which calls on all candidates to commit to attend a workshop on how to properly interpret statistics and data in public life.

The list includes 31 MPs standing for re-election, as well as dozens of other candidates in safe or winnable seats on 7 May. Supporters include Lib Dem Business Secretary Vince Cable, Labour's Work & Pensions Select Committee chair Anne Begg (Lab), and Conservative party vice-chairman Richard Harrington.

The idea to offer MPs statistics training follows RSS polling of MPs during the previous parliamentary term, in which only 40% were found to answer a simple question about the probability of flipping a coin and getting two heads in a row*. There has also been criticism of how politicians are presenting their numbers during the election campaign, particularly on contentious issues like the cost of living and the economy.

Previous research has showed only 9% of people in the UK believe politicians use figures accurately when discussing their policies, with 66% disagreeing**.

The RSS will be scheduling a number of training sessions in Westminster for MPs after the election, aimed at supporting parliamentarians in their work and give them extra confidence when dealing with complex data. It will also highlight some of the most common pitfalls people fall into when assessing risk and luck.

In total, campaign supporters have sent over 2,000 messages to candidates in 142 different constituencies throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Of the responses that have been forwarded to the RSS, 225 candidates have given a clear commitment to attend a statistics workshop (correct as of Monday 27 April), with more candidate pledges being added daily.

Support for the campaign is well split amongst the various political parties, with 54 Labour, 50 Liberal Democrat, 59 Green, 29 Conservative and 18 UKIP candidates signed up for statistics training should they be elected.

The #ParliamentCounts campaign can be found online at www.rss.org.uk/lobby, including a list of candidates who have already given their support to the campaign.

Commenting on the findings, Jenny Freeman, the Royal Statistical Society's Vice President for External Affairs, said:

"MPs are expected to deal with a huge range of statistics in their day-to-day roles, so it is vital they understand and use them correctly. Voters want to know their elected representatives have a good grasp of the numbers."

"The RSS is thrilled our #ParliamentCounts campaign has taken off with thousands of messages being sent to election candidates and more than 220 of them now signed up. Statistics training for MPs won't turn Westminster into a centre of mathematical excellence overnight, but it's a big step in the right direction."

ENDS

NOTES

* In 2012, 97 MPs during the last parliament were asked what the probability is of flipping a coin and getting two heads in a row. A BBC story about the polling can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19801666>.

** Research by the RSS, Ipsos MORI and King's College London in 2013 showed that only 9% of people agreed with the statement "Politicians use figures accurately when talking about their Policies", with 66% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. See <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/rss-kings-ipsos-mori-trust-in-statistics-topline.pdf> (Q2)

CONTACTS

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The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) founded in 1834 is one of the world's most distinguished and renowned statistical societies. It is a learned society for statistics, a professional body for statisticians and a charity which promotes statistics, data and evidence for the public good. Today the Society has 6000 members around the world. www.rss.org.uk