

# Who enters politics and why? On the psychology of British politicians



**James Weinberg** introduces his new book on the personality characteristics of British politicians. He provides a timely psychological analysis of those who pursue political careers and how they represent their constituents once elected.

*[Parliament] is a wonderful place, filled overwhelmingly by people who are motivated by their notion of the national interest[...] We degrade this Parliament at our peril.*

It does not require any great grasp of contemporary polling and public opinion in the UK to recognise that this proclamation, [expressed by John Bercow](#) upon his retirement from public office, fails to capture the public mood about our political representatives. Conversely, scholars interested in the public's intuitive thinking about politicians have [revealed an overwhelmingly negative vernacular](#) about 'craven' elites who are 'self-interested', 'self-regarding', 'unprincipled', and 'ambitious'. The contrast between these emic and etic perspectives of politicians is, then, a conundrum.

It is also a puzzle with practical significance. On one hand, [survey data](#) continue to reveal remarkable levels of public distrust, political apathy, political inefficacy and democratic despondency that crystallize around popular judgments about those who actually govern. On the other hand, democratic elections in the UK and elsewhere decide 'who' has power in the political system, but not that specific commitment that allows it to persist (what Montesquieu regarded as the 'nature' and 'principle' of government). For those of us who have been concerned by the degenerative slide to 'mainstream populism' seen in western democracies and the dog-whistle politics of those making representative claims that undermine democratic values (invocations about immigrants or EU bureaucrats during the 2016 referendum campaign in the UK being a case in point), there is an academic imperative to understand the motivations and machinations of those who formally represent and thus make representative claims in that capacity.

It is in this context that my new book, [Who Enters Politics and Why?](#), explores original data on the personalities of British politicians, specifically the [Basic Human Values](#) of 168 MPs, in order to draw unique insights about those who choose a political career, how they represent 'us' once they get there, and whether public antipathy towards politicians is justified. Combined with survey data from hundreds of elected local councillors and unsuccessful election candidates, as well as in-depth interviews with current and former MPs who have held some of the highest political offices, these analyses help me to cast light on the question: do we get the 'wrong' politicians?

## Highlight #1: Political ambition and candidate emergence

The central argument underpinning one of the chapters is that rational choice explanations of political ambition, pioneered by Joseph Schlesinger, have long overlooked the potentially powerful influence of unobservable individual differences on citizens' political aspirations (or lack thereof). Put simply, it is wrong to assume that we would all be equally desirous of running for office should the right opportunity structures present themselves.

Combining elite data with surveys administered to the British public by the 8<sup>th</sup> wave of the European Social Survey, I find that democratic politics is a profession few 'ordinary' people care to enter. At an aggregate level, British politicians – and those who stand for office but fail to get elected – are more motivated by equality, social justice and caring for others (Self-Transcendence values), and more autonomous and open-minded (Openness values), than the *comparatively* small-c conservative population they govern (who are otherwise more motivated by Conformity, Tradition and Security values). However, these comparisons also indicate that politicians generally, and MPs in particular, are more driven than the public to control resources and be in charge of others (Power values), and that these differences in Self-Enhancement values are exaggerated among those MPs who rise to the frontbench. Multivariate analyses demonstrate that personality characteristics like basic values can explain as much or more variance in political ambition and candidate emergence than other well-researched demographic and socio-economic variables such as gender, age, education and prior occupation.

## Highlight #2: Partisanship and psychological congruence

I also look at the interaction between partisanship and basic values to answer three important and interrelated questions. Firstly, do politicians share the value priorities (and thus motivational goals) of those citizens who vote for them and, ultimately, trust them with their democratic sovereignty? Secondly, if politicians really are 'all the same', does this accusation extend to the psychology of elites who self-identify within the same or different political blocs? And thirdly, do we have a parliament of representatives who are sufficiently different from their partisan competitors to ensure adequate and pluralistic contestation about the 'common good' and what good government should look like?

In exploring these lines of inquiry, various analyses show (a) partisanship and basic values share a strong relationship at all levels, (b) partisan elites are much more polarised in their basic values than partisans in the public, and (c) psychological congruence between MPs and voters occurs to a much greater extent on the Right of British politics than the Left. For example, Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrat MPs and voters score higher for Self-Transcendence values than their Conservative colleagues. In many ways, these results reflect the ideological foundations of the UK's centre-left parties and, in particular, their strong advocacy of social welfare ideals. By contrast, Conservative MPs and voters score higher for Conservation values (Conformity, Tradition and Security), again in line with the party's historic ideological roots in social and economic hierarchy. Yet when comparing the basic values of MPs with partisan voters from multiple UK elections, voters for parties on the Left of British politics (primarily Labour) are more psychologically akin to out-partisans on the Right, and elected politicians on the Right (primarily Conservative), than those politicians on the Left that they actually elect.

These findings add nuance to mainstream theories of instrumental and expressive partisanship in which voters are either seen as Athenian democrats weighing evidence or alternatively as heuristic-driven motivated reasoners. I argue that these analytical frames hide a more nuanced story of 'psychological sorting' that has implications, on one hand, for why and how elite partisans (otherwise competitors for votes and promotions) cooperate to achieve common goals and, on the other hand, for the importance of psychological congruency between leaders and followers in democratic politics. On the latter point, these findings help to make sense of the successes and failures of the Labour Party in recent decades.

## Highlight #3: Real and ideal politicians

Stepping back to examine that state of political consumption, I also look at the existence of an unhealthy premium on the individual in contemporary democratic politics. This exists both in terms of the ways representatives understand and execute their professional function and how/why voters become disillusioned regardless of their political choices. Specifically, I seek to understand the extent to which personality characteristics such as basic values may improve our grasp of the dynamics in contemporary anti-politics when they characterize the choice set (that is, what voters see and select) rather than simply the participants (that is, politicians/ candidates' self-report data that are also covered in the book).

To achieve this, I test a number of hypothetical assumptions grounded in existing studies of the personalisation of politics and the media through a conjoint experiment of voting preferences. Put simply, I asked a representative sample of the British public to choose between randomly populated hypothetical profiles of politicians in an election scenario. These profiles comprise images and text, including adapted survey items for basic values re-written in the first person. The resultant data show that in experimental scenarios where voters do not know the partisanship of a candidate, personality outweighs other political and socioeconomic variables as a voting heuristic. Compared with data from 168 *real* MPs, these results also indicate that at the aggregate level there is less of a disjuncture than assumed between the personalities the public *want* in national politics and the personalities they *get*.

In evaluating these findings, I show firstly that the voting public does indeed have preferences for certain personality characteristics in politics and that these matter at the (hypothetical) ballot box. The implications for party selectorates, campaigners, and political advertising are myriad. Secondly, there appears to be a 'perception gap' in contemporary democratic politics. If voters are able to express clear psychological preferences for candidates in experimental scenarios, and these are at the same time reflective of real MPs, then we must ask why an extant literature in anti-politics routinely finds public disapprobation for the personal qualities of MPs.

## Conclusion

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Far from acting as an apologist for politicians, I argue that it is both fair and democratically necessary to remember that they are neither an homogenised group of saints nor sinners. Insofar as my book adds nuance and colour to an otherwise black and white discourse about the probity of those who seek political office, I hope that it stimulates more rigorous research in political science and more responsible rhetoric in political communication.

In addition to the highlights presented here, the book also engages theoretically and empirically with important questions about the psychological aspects of substantive and descriptive representation, political careerism, and legislative behaviour. As such, the book should be of interest to academic audiences engaged in the fields of political psychology, political leadership and political behaviour as well as audiences beyond academe who are either cynically or optimistically enthused by the current state of representative politics.

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