

Merton College Long Vacation 2021 Undergraduate Research Project Report

'What makes a politician?'

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In the summer of 2021, at the end of my degree's final exams, I was pleased to be invited to stay in Oxford to work on an independent, self-directed research project funded by Merton College. In preparation for future postgraduate studies, I conducted a review of the existing literature in political science on the motivations of candidates for political office, investigating how people who choose to enter politics differ from those who do not.

The final paper in my degree – in fact, my very final *tutorial* – introduced me to the thought of Max Weber, an early 20th-century German sociologist and political economist, whose seminal essay *Politics as a Vocation* (1919) inspired this project. In the essay, Weber considers the opposing ethics of virtue and consequentialism required by political actors and the psychological traits politicians should and do exhibit to navigate the irreconcilable conflict between them. Weber's analysis of politics, in which Caesarist political leaders are selected and trained by party machines and, through election, mandated to confront the bureaucratic petrification heralded by modernity, gave words and an analytical framework to the core of my growing reservations with the literature in political science to which I had been exposed in previous modules: this literature had treated politicians as rather ordinary decisionmakers, rather than characterised by unusual psychological constitutions that affect their decisionmaking and, by consequence, policy outcomes. It was a fitting tutorial topic with which to bookend my degree, by which I was particularly excited. So, I felt especially privileged to be granted the opportunity to delve further into its implications before leaving Oxford.

Most of us would not rationally choose to enter the political life: politics provides a theatre for conflict that can often be intense, personal, and utterly inconsequential. So we should suspect that there might be something extraordinary about those who enter politics despite this – perhaps politicians have a relatively higher estimation than the rest of us of the returns to political solutions, or a higher tolerance for 'toxic politics', or a thrill for the theatricalities specific to political life, or greater intrinsic rewards to power, conflict or popularity. After all, we are each familiar with popular notions that politicians are power-seeking, selfish, or crooked; how accurate are these notions, and if they are accurate, how do they affect how politics works?

I settled on four questions to begin to investigate for my project:

- (1) to which degree and in what ways those in politics are psychologically different;
- (2) whether they are primed differently before participating in politics or as a result of conditioning;
- (3) how these abnormalities affect decisionmaking outcomes; and
- (4) which factors affect the magnitude of these effects.

The cumulative effect of the answers might be a framework for analysing political competition as an interactive process between political actors sharing abnormal psychological constitutions, which could then be reapplied to better understanding Weberian analyses of bureaucracies, as well as other questions in political theory and political science, such as Marxist debates on transitional socialism and democratic qualities.

By extending my time in Oxford, with access to the extensive collections of the Social Science Library, the project offered the opportunity of a lifetime to investigate these questions with a blank canvas and open mind as to what the results might be, and so discern whether I could pursue this interest in future postgraduate studies.

As far as my initial explorations went, I found that this question had only recently been grappled by several books and journal articles published in the last three years, including psychological surveys of British parliamentarians and analyses of increasing polarisation among political candidates. Over the course of the project, I grew to realise that these contributions were founded on a rich, older literature in political ambition and recruitment. They had recognised some of the methodological limitations in the subject matter which I had overlooked: for example, because political entry is a rare event, the small number of politicians makes it difficult to conclude anything about how they might compare to others in political life, while a larger proportion of the population exhibits political ambition which can therefore be more easily surveyed (Gulzar, 2021).

Additionally, I discovered that my questions have been afforded treatment in a range of disciplines with distinct approaches, both in academia and in the popular press, from the leadership literature in international relations to biographical approaches in history, not to mention the necessary insights from psychology and management theories. For example, one work noted that many British Prime Ministers and politicians had suffered a significant loss in childhood, especially of a parent or close family member (Iremonger, 1970). As I had not encountered these disciplines or approaches in the modules I chose for my degree, the project offered valuable time to understand better the prevailing frameworks and insights in each. A comprehensive survey of my questions would also survey related subject matters, such as political dynasties in which people of the same family enter politics, each of these subject matters bringing its own literature.

By the end of my project, I had identified several promising avenues for research where I felt I could contribute substantially to this nascent literature in any future postgraduate studies, whether by drawing insights from these other disciplines or conducting analyses of youth political organisations and political systems in non-Western countries, where the research on political ambition has not been anywhere near as extensive. During the project, I also spent some time reading more deeply into research approaches in political science. I found myself excited to continue exploring these questions.

When I sat down to write this report, I noted that students in previous years have reflected on how the experience of a residential project had especially affected their research, and I wanted to add my voice to those reflections. The project would not have been possible without access to the Social Science Library's physical collections, and Merton College's generosity in purchasing some of the books I required, which are now in the College Library for the enjoyment of future students. I also drew much help in discussing my project over lunches and suppers with the community of students that had stayed in college over the vacation. Through the exchange of academic conversation between students of different subjects at different stages of their academic life, I appreciated perhaps more than I had done at any other point in my degree the beauty of Oxford's collegiate life, which was regrettably hurt by the pandemic, and which can be overshadowed in the busyness of term-time by an unhelpful sense of division between students in different years of studies.

I am very thankful to Merton College for enabling my project, and to everyone who helped and encouraged me in my research.

References:

Gulzar, Saad (2021). *Who Enters Politics and Why?* Annual Review of Political Science, Vol. 24, No. 1. pp. 253-75.

Iremonger, Lucille (1970). *The Fiery Chariot: A Study of British Prime Ministers and the Search for Love* (London: Secker & Warburg).