

What Makes a Good Politician? Reassessing the Criteria Used for Political Recruitment

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This is a work in progress – comments welcome.

Abstract

What makes a good candidate for electoral office? There is surprisingly little consensus in answering this question. For parties, it may be subjective criteria such as eloquence, intelligence, charisma, or networks (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Murray 2010). It may also be more democratically dubious criteria such as party loyalty, independent financial resources, or family ties. Political theorists debate the relative merits of descriptive, substantive, symbolic, surrogate, gyrosopic, or promissory representatives (Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 2003; Pitkin 1967; Przeworski et al 1999; Rehfeld 2009), while for many empiricists, the measures of candidate strength are levels of education and/or income (Baltrunaite et al 2012; Besley et al 2012; Franceschet and Piscopo 2012; Galasso and Nannicini 2011; Júlio and Tavares 2010; Verge 2011). For the public, in contrast, many of these criteria are not important: they simply want someone who can recognise, understand and defend their views and interests.

With so many different interpretations of candidate quality, and with very few codified criteria for candidate selection (Hazan and Rahat 2010), it is difficult to prove conclusively whether party candidate selection procedures discriminate against women, either negatively or positively (for example, through the use of quotas). There is evidence, however, that the criteria currently used by parties are based on male norms that may disadvantage women (Bacchi 1996; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Attributes more commonly held by women may be overlooked or undervalued (Franceschet et al 2012). Party selectors may not be aware of these biases and believe they are selecting the best available candidates, even when the outcome is the over-recruitment of men.

Given that current candidate selection criteria are ill-defined, poorly specified, difficult to measure and discriminatory, this paper considers how to identify new criteria that are more objective, measurable, unbiased, and better suited to the requirements of representation.

Most scholars and practitioners of politics would agree that meritocracy within politics is a desirable thing. Everyone benefits when those who represent us are the best possible people for the job. This viewpoint is relatively uncontroversial. The problem is that this is where the consensus ends; defining what makes someone the “best” politician attracts far more dissent. The perspectives of political theorists differ from the criteria used to evaluate politicians in empirical studies of legislator quality. These various “academic” criteria do not map well onto the more self-interested motivations of political parties, which in turn diverge from the expressed preferences of voters. Furthermore, in all of these criteria there is a risk of bias in favour of the status quo, with all groups likely to evaluate more highly the qualities of those already present in politics than the qualities of excluded groups. The definition of a “good” politician is therefore highly subjective. As a result, there are no agreed criteria through which to evaluate prospective candidates for political office and to judge those already elected. Determining whether political recruitment is meritocratic is not possible if there is no universally accepted definition of “merit”. Thus, it is very difficult to know whether current cohorts of politicians are the best that society has to offer, and, if not, who else might be a better prospect.

The purpose of this paper is to reappraise the criteria for being a “good” politician. As such, it will offer a first step towards providing the necessary means for assessing the presence or absence of meritocracy within recruitment practices¹. The first part of the paper draws on existing literature in four main areas. First, it considers the normative principles of representation laid out by political theorists, and the traits required to fulfil the requirements of representative democracy. Second, it examines empirical studies of politician quality, looking at the objective (but potentially flawed) criteria used to rank politicians by merit. Third, the paper draws on studies of candidate recruitment by political parties in order to identify which traits and qualities are most favoured by those actually responsible for selecting political personnel. Finally, the perspectives of voters are considered, demonstrating what matters to citizens when choosing their representatives. The limitations of all of these approaches will then be discussed, considering their inherent contradictions, their limited relevance to the actual performance of representation, and their tendency to favour the status quo at the expense of outsider groups. The second part of the paper then goes back to first principles, re-examining the actual roles and functions of a political representative. On this basis, I propose more appropriate criteria which relate specifically to the ability to perform the task of representation. These criteria are then used to create a job description and person specification for representatives, based on what is needed rather than what is expedient and/or what has come before.

Existing definitions of a “good” politician

Understanding what it takes to represent others is a key component of normative political theory. Many works have been devoted to this theme, from the ancient to the contemporary. Issues within this literature include the extent to which representatives should be trustees who exercise independent decision-making, or delegates who are beholden to the

¹ Providing a full working definition of meritocracy within political recruitment is a larger project, of which this paper is an early part.

will of their constituents (Eulau et al 1959). By these standards, an ideal representative would be someone capable of independent thought and wise decision-making, who was also able to consult with constituents and include their perspectives wherever possible. The definition of “whenever possible” is, of course, open to debate; a partisan of trustee theory might consider that it is neither necessary nor desirable to consult with the public over any issue, given the ignorance of the public on most matters of governance, and the heterogeneity of public opinion. However, if for no other reason than the imperative of re-election, most politicians cannot ignore the views and preferences of their constituents, especially when these are expressed strongly and by a sizeable proportion of voters. A politician can be an authentic and successful representative of others only if she² shares enough of their perspectives to be able to act on their behalf and with their ongoing consent.

Hanna Pitkin (1967) expands on these themes, exploring how representatives “act for” others. She considers the notions of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Descriptive representation is conceptualised at the group rather than individual level, with the identities and demographic traits of elected representatives collectively reflecting those of society as a whole. A descriptively representative parliament would be a “microcosm” of the population it was drawn from. Individual representatives can act as descriptive representatives of those constituents who share their demographic features. Substantive representation entails the representation of interests rather than identities, although the two are often linked, as the latter frequently shape the former. There is a widespread expectation in the literature that descriptive representation is an important facilitator of substantive representation, even if it is neither necessary nor sufficient (Celis 2006; Reingold 2006; Swers 2005). Symbolic representation ensures that all groups within society feel included within the political process and can identify with the institutions of democracy.

The achievement of descriptive, symbolic and, to a lesser extent, substantive representation all depends on the composition of legislatures as a whole rather than the traits of individual representatives³. Hence, the different types of representation may be seen as a reflection of the quality of representative democracy per se, rather than indicators of candidate quality. Nonetheless, the surfeit of certain traits at the individual level has resulted in a collective failure of many legislatures to represent constituents effectively on these dimensions (Franceschet et al 2012). The absence of diversity within legislatures indicates that representatives may be accessing politics based on criteria other than optimal quality. Certain societal groups are significantly overrepresented within politics compared to others, including men, ethnic majority groups, socio-economic elites, and older age groups.⁴ This lack of descriptive representation has fuelled debates regarding meritocracy within political

² For stylistic purposes, representatives are referred to interchangeably in the male or female singular form. The use of this form should be construed to denote a representative of either sex.

³ Individual politicians can effect substantive representation as “critical actors” (Childs and Krook 2009), so the collective rule applies less clearly to this type of representation, but substantive representation is hypothesised to be best achieved when there is a sufficient number of actors present to promote and support particular interests. While attempts to quantify the number required have been challenged (Childs and Krook 2006), the overall principle of strength in numbers remains persuasive.

⁴ Some countries have already sought to address the distorting effect of their political recruitment processes on the composition of their legislatures, in order to rectify the noted limitations of elite, male-dominated legislatures. For example, the application of gender quotas means that the sex of candidates is now an explicit criterion influencing selection practices for parties in dozens of countries worldwide.

recruitment. Defenders of the status quo claim that the best candidate should be selected irrespective of their descriptive traits, even if this leads to significant imbalance in the composition of parliaments. Advocates of descriptive representation counter that political recruitment is biased in favour of members of certain social groups, and as such cannot be a genuine meritocracy. These two perspectives lead to competing claims regarding candidate quality. The former implies that political recruitment is already meritocratic and that the measure of a good politician is therefore to be found by looking at existing politicians and selection practices. The latter perspective indicates that something has gone awry in the recruitment process and that the existing political class may not be the best that society has to offer (Murray 2014). If so, the current definitions of “merit” will require reworking to eliminate ingrained bias; this is considered in greater detail below.

Jane Mansbridge (2003) offers further definitions of representation, including anticipatory, gyroscopic and surrogate representation. Anticipatory representation is an assessment of politicians based on prospective evaluations of their future performance, unlike promissory representation, which evaluates politicians retrospectively on their fulfilment of earlier promises. Anticipatory representation affords greater opportunity to newcomers without an established track-record, although promissory representation is important for the principle of holding representatives to account for their actions. Similar perspectives are discussed by Przeworski et al (1999), using the concepts of mandates and accountability. Gyroscopic representatives are a variant of trustees, looking within themselves to make decisions based on their own beliefs and experiences. Politicians who operate on gyroscopic principles would need to share the perspectives of their constituents, perhaps through shared identities or experiences, as their opinions are unlikely to be shaped by external influences. This concept of representation would therefore be problematic in the absence of descriptive representation. Meanwhile, surrogate representatives may speak for groups other than their own constituents, perhaps due to shared descriptive characteristics or interests. For example, African American legislators in the USA often act as surrogate representatives for African American citizens beyond their own districts (Brookman 2013). As with gyroscopic representation, this approach therefore favours diversity and balance across the legislature as a whole.

Building on these ideas, Andrew Rehfeld identifies three distinctions within the debate on trustee and delegate definitions of representation. These distinctions are:

1. Aims: whether the representative-lawmaker aims at the good of all or the good of a part;
2. Source of judgement: whether the representative-lawmaker relies on his or her own judgement or the judgement of a third party
[...]
3. Responsiveness: the degree to which the representative-lawmaker is responsive to sanctions (usually, but not necessarily, the prospect of reelection)

(Rehfeld 2009: 215)

Rehfeld argues that representatives may differ on each of these dimensions, thus creating eight distinct types of representative rather than two. The extent to which either option on any of the three distinctions is more desirable for democracy is the subject of debate. For example, some would consider the ideal representative to be someone who acts for the greater good of the country, while others would expect a good representative to act first and foremost to defend the interests of the constituents who elected him. How best to prioritise between the representation of a nation, a constituency and one or more descriptive identities is disputed. Many of these debates within normative political theory therefore allow us only to distinguish between different forms of representation, but not to determine which is “best”. Identifying “good” politicians is not possible solely on the basis of these criteria.

An exception to this rule is the work by Suzanne Dovi (2007), which aims explicitly to provide a normative framework for assessing the quality of representatives. Dovi elaborates three “virtues” that a “good representative” should possess: the virtues of fair-mindedness, critical trust building, and good gatekeeping. Fair-minded politicians uphold the norms and values of representative democracy, respecting the needs of all citizens even when defending particular viewpoints. They demonstrate democratic efficacy, finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts and enhancing the legitimacy of democratic institutions. They also attend to civic equality, whereby all citizens are included in the democratic process. Hence, fair-minded politicians can defend particular interests to the extent that this does not compromise the overall fortunes of the nation. To fulfil the second virtue, good representatives should promote critical trust and enhance participation in the political process, by allowing citizens a maximum of autonomy and self-governance. Thirdly, good gatekeeping requires ensuring the inclusion of all groups within society, including the dispossessed and the marginalised, rather than allowing the exclusion of certain voices from the political process. Thus, the national interest is considered from a consensus rather than majoritarian perspective. Together, these virtues form an effective means of evaluating the democratic efficacy of representatives. In this respect, they are a very useful and important addition to the literature on representation. However, they are of limited benefit when defining meritocratic criteria for candidate selection, as Dovi’s virtues are most easily measured against the performance of those already in office. While prospective candidates may possess all of Dovi’s virtues, it may be difficult for them to demonstrate these qualities prior to election.

The insights provided by the literature on normative political theory are useful and important for evaluating politicians, but they are not sufficient for use as criteria in candidate selection. Moreover, they tend to focus on latent attributes which may be measurable only through the evaluation of observable activity, rather than being measured directly. This places at a disadvantage members of outsider groups who are trying to access political office for the first time and have not yet had an opportunity to demonstrate their competence. In contrast, the criteria used by empirical political scientists to evaluate the quality of politicians tend to focus on more concrete qualities that can be measured easily and objectively, even if they are not the most sophisticated or accurate predictors of legislator quality. For example, numerous studies use educational levels as a proxy for quality, on the assumption that better educated politicians will be more intelligent, more knowledgeable, and therefore better placed to make good decisions and sound policies (Baltrunaite et al 2012; Besley and Reynal-Querol 2011; Galasso and Nannicini 2011; Kotakorpi and Poutvaara 2011). However, while high

levels of educational attainment may be correlated with intellectual ability, they may also derive from privileged socio-economic status. Someone with a higher degree in economics from an elite university may have better knowledge of the functioning of the economy than someone without a university education, but may have far less knowledge about the impact of economic policies on the daily lives of most citizens. Lessons in political economy can be provided by experts and civil servants (whom one might reasonably expect to be highly educated), but knowledge of the economic reality of those from deprived backgrounds is more likely to be absent if legislatures are composed only of highly educated elites. This knowledge gap may compromise the quality of decisions taken and may reduce the efficacy and legitimacy of legislatures as a whole, especially if representatives use trustee or gyroscopic forms of representation that reflect their own experiences and beliefs rather than those of their constituents.

The theoretical limitations of using education as a measure of quality are compounded by the fact that this variable is often used alongside income to estimate the competence of candidates. The rationale is that more competent candidates will be in higher-status and better-paid professions commensurate with their talent and skills. However, this is a very imperfect approximation. Women tend to be paid less than men irrespective of their skills. Some highly-skilled professions, such as teaching and nursing (both of which are also “feminised”), tend to pay considerably less than other professions such as banking, finance or certain branches of law. Male footballers earn vastly more than their female counterparts. As with education, earned income may also stem from historical privilege. For example, social capital may enable those with good connections to obtain better remunerated employment than others who may be as highly skilled but who may lack the appropriate social networks. Good connections are a politically valuable skill only to the extent that they can provide access to resources; if they serve to include those from privileged backgrounds at the expense of others who might be more highly skilled and more in touch with voters, then they may be anti-meritocratic. The use of income as a measure of quality is therefore highly suspect.

Certain studies use additional criteria to assess skills and qualifications for office, including prior political and professional experience, as well as demographic information such as age and sex (Júlio and Tavares 2010; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Murray 2010b; O’Brien 2012; Verge 2011). Prior political experience may be a function of longevity in politics rather than talent, and may favour men compared to women, as women may have heavier caring responsibilities that prevent them from taking as active a role in politics during their child-rearing years. However, many women do get heavily involved in politics, through choosing not to have children, involving others (such as fathers) in the care of their children, or embarking in politics once their children are older. In any event, prior experience in politics demonstrates commitment, knowledge and a track record, all of which are likely to benefit a candidate during the recruitment process. Professional experience is slightly more controversial, as it may again favour those with elite backgrounds. Research by Campbell and Cowley (2013, 2014) finds that certain professions, such as being a medical doctor, are viewed particularly favourably by voters, whereas other high-status and high-income professions such as being a lawyer or banker were not regarded nearly as highly. Professions that provide direct political experience, such as working for a political party or as a parliamentary aide, are also viewed as suspect. “Career politicians” stand accused of

knowing too little of the “real world”, even if their professional experience helps them to adapt more rapidly to life as an elected politician (Allen 2013; Barber 2014; Cowley 2012). Other professions may benefit a political career through expedience – for example, the ability to take a career break while elected to parliament and then to resume afterwards if necessary – rather than being a profession which inherently qualifies someone for office (Cairney 2007). The validity of using prior profession as a measure of merit must therefore be called into question; at best, the measure requires refinement in order to distinguish whether there is a valid hierarchy of professions in terms of what they reveal about a candidate’s skills and ability to serve as a political representative.

The criteria used in empirical studies of candidate quality tend to prioritise that which is easily measurable over that which might have the most meaningful impact on a prospective politician’s performance of the job. Latent qualities such as charisma, eloquence or intelligence are measured imperfectly through proxy variables such as educational attainment and career path. The difficulty in controlling for socio-economic advantage means that these studies struggle to distinguish between those who have achieved high social status through attainment, and those who have obtained it through privilege. These studies are therefore of limited validity in ascertaining whether the over-representation of social elites within politics is evidence of the presence or absence of meritocracy. To resolve this conundrum, we need to continue to delve deeper into the qualities required to represent others.

So far we have explored the criteria used by academics to evaluate politicians. The theoretical characteristics have been somewhat abstract, and the empirical characteristics have been somewhat arbitrary. In both cases, difficulties have emerged in finding an accurate and observable measure of merit. In the next two sets of criteria that we explore – those used by parties and by voters – the focus is rather different. The emphasis on objective criteria is replaced with subjective judgements, which enables the use of more latent criteria but also introduces an increased risk of bias.

There is no single set of criteria deployed by political parties for selecting candidates. For one thing, there is significant variation in candidate selection practices between parties, depending on party cultures, levels of internal democracy, ideology, national traditions and so on. For example, a candidate with a regional accent and working-class background may be viewed more favourably by parties on the left than those on the right, while the reverse may be true for a candidate who has been privately educated. Additionally, parties cannot be treated as monolithic organisations with a uniform set of practices. Rather, they are a more or less coherent collective of individuals, all of whom may differ to some degree in their beliefs and practices. Even where parties have codified guidelines on candidate selection – which is rarely the case – they may not be adhered to perfectly by those actually charged with selecting candidates. The level at which candidate selection takes place also differs widely, from the most to the least inclusive. At the most inclusive level, candidates are selected through open primaries. Parties with high levels of internal democracy will normally allow members to select their candidates within each constituency. At the other end of the scale, parties that are elitist in structure may rely on the nomination of candidates by a small, closed selection committee.

Given the very wide variations in party practice, it might seem an impossible task to make any generalisations about what parties look for in a candidate. However, despite the

many disparities in recruitment practices, prior research has revealed some commonalities in the criteria that party selectorates use when evaluating prospective candidates (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Kittilson 2006; Murray 2010a). For example, parties want candidates who will meet the needs of the party. This includes being willing and able to contribute the resources (time and, in some cases, money) to campaign effectively on behalf of the party. As men, on average, enjoy greater free time and higher disposable income than women, these criteria might indirectly favour men. Even where women can commit significant resources to a political campaign, there may remain the perception that men will be more available and more committed.

Parties also seek a demonstrable willingness to engage with the party's ideals, and a commitment to support the party's message. Parties benefit from loyal candidates who can be relied upon to deliver the party's message faithfully and sincerely, and who can then be counted on following election to toe the party line, whether in public statements or in voting on legislation. Parties therefore place a high premium on loyalty when selecting their candidates. This is often demonstrated through a track record within the party, thus favouring those candidates with a long history of service to the party. However, relative newcomers may be able to compensate for their recent arrival if they can demonstrate their commitment through quality, rather than quantity, of support for the party cause. The value of loyalty is obvious from a party's perspective; the benefits to constituents are rather more questionable. Voters whose primary concern is to elect a party of government may appreciate a representative who is loyal to the party, as this enables them to make a clear nationally-oriented decision based on the party's manifesto. There is also scant evidence to support the hypothesis that voters reward representatives who rebel against their own parties (Vivyan and Wagner 2012). However, constituents who prefer their representative to act as a delegate, and to defend local interests, may be frustrated by a candidate whose loyalties lie with her party rather than with the territory that elected her.

Alongside seeking qualities that directly advance a party's interests, party selectors also cite a variety of attributes that are favoured in prospective candidates. These include charisma; eloquence; the ability to make convincing arguments; public speaking skills; good media presence; intelligence; and good networks within and beyond the party (Murray 2010a). The ideal candidate is one who can unite the party faithful within the constituency at the same time as drawing in a wider electorate. None of these criteria is overtly gendered, although many of the qualities sought are measured through subjective evaluations of candidates that may produce unconscious bias against women (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). The role of networks may also sometimes work against women, especially when they take the form of "old boys' networks" of men colluding together. From the perspective of democratic theory, the ability to defend interests cogently and effectively is certainly important, and so too is the ability to appeal to a broad demographic of voters.

Voter perceptions of candidates form the last of the four definitions of candidate "merit". The qualities sought by voters tend to differ somewhat from those sought by parties. While it is impossible to generalise about the preferences and priorities of entire electorates, a series of experimental studies has revealed a number of interesting voter preferences for certain types of candidates. The form taken by these studies is typically that of a controlled experiment, whereby voters are offered descriptions of two candidates and asked to choose

between them. Different treatments are applied in the form of small alterations to the profiles of the candidates, and the effect of these treatments is then compared to the control group to see whether the treatment alters voter preferences. Early experiments in this form were conducted to test whether changing the name of a candidate from male to female influenced voter responses to the candidate; the findings indicated that the perceived sex of the candidate did indeed matter (Alexander and Andersen 1993). Further experiments then indicated that voters viewed otherwise identical candidates as being stronger on certain policy areas, such as education, healthcare and welfare, if they believed the candidate to be female (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b). “Female” candidates were also ascribed “feminine” traits, such as being more warm, compassionate and honest. In contrast, “male” candidates were considered to be stronger on policy areas such as the economy, defence and foreign policy, and were considered to be tougher, more ambitious and more intelligent. These studies revealed the powerful role played by gender stereotypes in shaping voter impressions of candidates. Indeed, voters appear to form simple, impressionistic views of candidates based on attributes that ought not to have any bearing on the performance of those candidates as representatives. For example, Mattes and Milazzo (2014) found that their test subjects preferred candidates who were more physically attractive, and the preferences based solely on a brief glimpse at the photo of an otherwise unknown candidate mapped remarkably well onto the preferences expressed by the actual voters when these candidates stood for election. Physical appearance cannot in any form be construed to be a meritocratic criterion; it is neither objective, nor relevant to the performance of representation. Yet, candidates invest considerable effort in presenting themselves as well as possible in public appearances and publicity photographs, and some candidates have even taken action to improve their appearance, from dental work and weight loss to plastic surgery⁵. Such measures indicate the folly of basing selection criteria on voter preferences, given the irrational processes that shape voter judgements. Nonetheless, these irrational judgements have withstood repeated testing in a variety of contexts (Lawson et al 2010), so parties and candidates may place themselves at a potential disadvantage if they do not pander to these preferences. The possibility of achieving any kind of meritocracy within politics may be threatened if voters base their decisions on animal instincts rather than rational preferences.

However, to draw such a conclusion would be to overstate the importance of such studies and to underestimate the potential for voters to express preferences more in line with their rational interests. For example, several studies have identified strong voter preference for candidates who are local (Arzheimer and Evans 2012; Campbell and Cowley 2013; Cowley 2013; Górecki and Marsh 2012). This finding may indicate that voters seek someone with a shared identity, implying that voters like descriptive representation. (Indeed, geographical representation is the one form of descriptive representation that is routinely guaranteed within legislatures.) The finding may also indicate that voters anticipate that a

⁵ For example, Christina Fernandez, president of Argentina, has faced repeated rumours of having had cosmetic surgery. Ségolène Royal, the runner up in France’s presidential election in 2007, allegedly had dental surgery to improve her teeth and jawline prior to her presidential run; Dilma Rousseff, president of Brazil, had cosmetic work done to her teeth and face; Silvio Berlusconi, former prime minister of Italy, has undergone a number of cosmetic procedures; and François Hollande, president of France, lost a significant amount of weight before running for president in 2012.

candidate with local roots will do more to defend the interests of the territory, whereas a candidate “parachuted” in from further afield may have loyalties that lie elsewhere. Voters may be suspicious of a candidate perceived to be an outsider, who may not possess much knowledge of the area and its particular needs and interests. However, the emphasis on localism has sometimes been used as an excuse to close ranks against candidates who are seen as outsiders in other respects, such as female or ethnic minority candidates (Childs and Cowley 2011). Parties who try to reserve particular seats for women may find their efforts frustrated if the local party tries to insist on having a “local” male candidate rather than a female candidate brought in from a neighbouring district (Cowley 2013).

Aside a marked preference for local candidates, one might expect voters to prefer candidates with high levels of income and education and high-status professions, given the use of these criteria in the literature as proxies for candidate quality. However, research on voter evaluations indicates that this is not the case. Rosie Campbell and Phillip Cowley, in two related studies, found that candidates do not benefit from postgraduate qualifications, and that a candidate without university education was preferred to an otherwise identical candidate with a degree (Campbell and Cowley 2013). Candidates with high levels of income were also perceived negatively, perhaps due to envy, suspicions of ill-gotten gains, resentment of a perceived remote and elite political class, or simple desire for descriptive representation by someone with an income more comparable to that of the voter (Campbell and Cowley 2014). Profession was tested less systematically, with only a few professions subjected to testing. Perhaps predictably, voters responded positively to the candidate presented as a doctor (a well-regarded profession that is associated with skill, compassion and intelligence, as well as meeting an obvious need in society). Equally predictably, given the negative image of financiers since the recent crisis, voters were hostile to the candidate presented as a banker. The politico candidate was seen as more experienced, but was not rated more highly overall, indicating that the growing trend within politics towards a class of professional politicians does not inspire voters.

If voters are generally unimpressed with many of the qualities that are rated by academics and/or political parties, such as high levels of education, income and experience, and are also generally indifferent to the sex of candidates (Murray 2008; Studlar and Welch 1987), what do voters prioritise? A definitive answer to this question requires further research. We do know that voters like their representatives to spend a significant amount of time in the constituency (Campbell and Lovenduski 2014; Vivyan and Wagner 2014), which both supports the research indicating support for local candidates (and, perhaps, local issues), and indicates that voters are not content with the trustee model of representation, but want someone who is easily accessible and to whom their preferences can be transmitted. Existing research also appears to support the hypothesis that voters want someone “like them”, in tune with their own experiences, interests and preferences (Campbell and Cowley 2014). Furthermore, a study by Cowley (2013) showed clear voter preferences for greater representation of a number of descriptive characteristics within legislatures, including wanting more MPs who were working class, women, disabled, young, and from an ethnic minority. Hence, descriptive representation may better reflect voter preferences than the more elitist conceptions of candidate quality advanced by political scientists and, to some extent, political parties. Authenticity, shared backgrounds and a genuine understanding of the lives of

constituents may better qualify candidates for office, both objectively and in the eyes of voters, than markers of elite status. While voters tend to hold politicians to higher moral and ethical standards (Campbell and Lovenduski 2014), they do not necessarily want someone who is otherwise of higher social status than themselves.

The notion of meritocracy within political recruitment must therefore be mindful of the very particular nature of political representation, relative to other professions; being the “best” representative may entail being an effective communicator of what it is to be “average”. In other words, while we might desire policy-makers to be skilled and talented, we also desire representatives who can speak authentically in our stead, and this may require politicians whose backgrounds and experiences are considered to be common rather than exceptional. Reconciling these two potentially conflicting goals – the need to be skilled and talented, and the need to be recognisably similar to others – requires a much more finely tuned conception of meritocracy. In particular, an effective definition of meritocracy may require a focus on personal qualities – which are subjective and difficult to measure – rather than conventional markers of achievement and social status, which are more easily measured but less valid as measures of merit in this context.

However, reliance on subjective evaluations of merit carries two particular risks. The first is that stereotyping, which is pervasive, often unconscious, and therefore extremely hard to eradicate, may lead certain types of candidate (such as women or ethnic minorities) to be evaluated less highly, all other things being equal (Kanter 1977). The second is that the very criteria by which we evaluate candidates are shaped by path dependence and societal norms, both of which favour the status quo (Bacchi 1996; Young 2000). When we think of a representative, we are more likely to imagine someone who fits the existing model – typically a wealthy white male (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). When we think of a good representative, we may therefore also think of a wealthy white male. While we might not directly assume that wealth, white skin, or being male are essential qualifications for political office, we might nonetheless internalise norms associated with social class, race and gender that lead us unconsciously to favour candidates resembling the status quo.

For example, we might assume that a successful businessman would be better qualified for office than a childcare worker. The former profession is higher status and better remunerated, and someone attuned to the needs of the business world might be better placed to understand what is needed to drive forward economic growth. Yet, someone who works with children for a living might possess important social skills such as communication, patience and creativity, and might also be better placed to make policy in a number of important areas of governance, such as education, healthcare, welfare and family policy. The conventional wisdom that a businessman is better qualified for political office may therefore stem from prevailing norms rather than from an accurate assessment of the relative merits of the two professions. If we focus on management of the economy as the central role of parliaments, rather than thinking about making effective policies across the full policy spectrum, we subscribe to the dominant masculinist model of politics and hence perpetuate the status quo. We assume that the policy areas most associated with wealthy men are those that are most important, and that wealthy men are best placed to advance these policy areas. As Taylor notes, “one way discrimination is perpetuated is by the dominance of elite white men over...the idea of what counts as *merit*” (1991: 233, original emphasis). Internalised

notions of merit that are based on an elite male model may overlook alternative qualities that are at least as important for political representation. Franceschet et al argue that “assessing female politicians’ backgrounds and preparations according to norms established by men’s longstanding participation risks ignoring or discounting the types of qualifications women do bring to politics, such as extensive backgrounds in grassroots or community organizing” (2012: 11).

The search for a valid, unbiased and measurable definition of meritocracy therefore remains incomplete, even after considering the perspectives of political theorists, empirical studies of candidate quality, research on political parties, and studies of voter preferences. No clear, universal definition emerges from these studies, each of which offers a somewhat contradictory perspective. Furthermore, all of these perspectives are potentially tarnished by an ingrained bias in favour of the status quo, resulting in the overvaluing of the traits possessed by current politicians, and the potential underestimation of the merit of non-traditional traits and qualifications.

How can this dilemma be resolved? One way would be to conduct further research into the preferences of selectors and electors in order better to establish the criteria currently being used to define merit in candidates. There is definitely significant scope for further research in this area. However, this would still not resolve the fact that both parties and voters may be using suboptimal criteria that reflect social norms rather than the qualities that most objectively and accurately permit the functioning of effective political representation. Eradicating bias from these criteria is extremely difficult, as social norms affect all of society, including the author and readers of this paper. One way to approach the problem is to seek to decouple theory from current practice, and to return to first principles. Rather than thinking about who representatives are and what they do, it might be instructive to think about what representation is and what it requires. On this basis, the definition of merit can be targeted directly at the ability to fulfil the requirements of representation. The remainder of this paper constitutes a first attempt to construct such a definition.

Constructing “meritocratic” selection criteria from first principles⁶

There is no universal definition of “merit”; rather, merit pertains to the ability to perform a specific task well. In order to define meritocratic criteria for political recruitment, it is therefore necessary to consider what the task is, and which qualities are required for its successful performance. The task of political representation is complex, and the job of a member of parliament is more complex still. The multifaceted nature of the task varies across time and place, but typically comprises at least four key roles: a parliamentary role, a constituency role, a symbolic role, and an electoral role. While this latter category is an imperative for a candidate rather than for an elected representative, the reality of political life is that most politicians seek re-election, and the nature of the permanent election campaign means that they effectively do so throughout their political career. The ability to win elections is therefore as necessary to the performance of representation as the other three categories. A possible fifth category is a party role. Most legislators do belong to political

⁶ This section of the paper is very much a first draft. I expect that it will require significant revision in light of the discussion at the Joint Sessions. Please do not cite without permission and please contact me for a more recent version of the paper. All comments, feedback and constructive suggestions are very welcome.

parties, and have specific functions as members of a parliamentary party. However, the nature of these functions varies significantly depending on factors such as the size of the party and whether the party is in government or opposition. While it is rare to be elected without a party label, it is possible, and more so in some democracies than others. Holding a party role is therefore not a prerequisite to being a representative, and the tasks that legislators perform for their parties are not necessarily an integral part of their function *as democratic representatives*, even if they are effectively an integral part of the job of being a member of parliament. The inclusion of this fifth category is therefore debatable. I have chosen here to leave it out, but am open to persuasion if a case can be made for its inclusion.

Within each of these four key roles lie numerous separate tasks. The personal qualities required to fulfil these tasks will frequently overlap, so a final definition of meritocratic criteria can eliminate repetitions to provide a more narrow set of necessary qualities. However, at this developmental stage, I have provided an experimental list of the different functions of a representative, accompanied by the qualities required to perform each function successfully. These are outlined in Table One. This table takes the form of a tentative job description, accompanied by a person specification. One of the difficulties for voters of understanding what representatives do, and for selectors of evaluating candidates, is precisely the fact that no job description currently exists for members of parliament (Campbell and Lovenduski 2014). A goal of this research is to develop a full working job description, accompanied by a person specification form and compatible with the standards required by formal recruitment procedures within the professional world. This can then be used as a benchmark against which to evaluate candidates, based on the actual requirements of the job rather than potentially biased expectations influenced by the status quo. Of course, the criteria that I have used here are themselves informed by the status quo, and as such cannot be guaranteed to be free from bias, but I have sought to keep the criteria as neutral and relevant as possible. It is likely that this initial draft contains errors and omissions; feedback is most welcome to help improve this early model. A more full discussion of the criteria detailed in Table One will be provided in an updated version of the paper after the workshop, as it is anticipated (and hoped!) that the model will be revised considerably in light of the discussion stemming from the workshop.

Table One: Prototype Job Description and Person Specification for Legislators

Job Description		Person Specification
Contest elections	Raise funds	Well-connected or supported by organisations
	Mobilise local party	Activist background
	Win votes	Charismatic/ persuasive
	Perform at hustings/ candidate debates	Good orator; good knowledge of policies
	Produce campaign materials	Good at marketing (or willing to take advice from others who are!)
	Manage public image	“Clean” (no financial/ sexual scandals etc); able to avoid embarrassing scenarios, bad judgement calls, poor choices of phrasing etc
	Manage media appearances	Articulate; relaxed in front of a camera; able to stay calm under pressure; thick-skinned
Constituency role	Represent geographical territory	Knowledge of local issues; willingness to defend territory; ability to balance territorial needs against national and/or party needs; based in constituency (desirable); from local area (desirable?)
	Surgeries, correspondence, constituency work	Good listener; patient; responsive; ability to exercise sound judgement when faced with conflicting viewpoints; communication skills; willingness to take action where appropriate; conscientious; genuine concern for local issues; approachable
	Conduit between local constituents and parliament	Ability to communicate national issues to constituents; ability to defend decisions taken; ability to listen to constituent viewpoints
	Participation in constituency events	Charisma; ability to work a crowd; good orator; willingness to work out of hours
	Spearhead local party	Leadership skills; good networker; good motivator
Parliamentary role	Contribute to parliamentary debates	Articulate; good orator; quick-witted; ability to make a case persuasively; authentic voice; knowledge and understanding of issues raised
	Hold executive to account	Vigilant; willing to take a stand
	Sit on parliamentary committees	Understanding of policy issues; ability to identify and communicate the needs of constituents; ability to articulate and defend interests
	Vote on policies	Sound judgement
	Initiate legislation	Motivation to take action on issues important to constituents; ability to mobilise support for a policy; ability to formulate effective policies
	Influence policy	Be able to persuade others; be motivated defender of interests; be able to access and influence those in power
Symbolic role	Embody representative democracy	Authentic representative of constituents
	Defend constituents	Understand constituent needs and perspectives; ability to communicate these needs effectively; ability to persuade others
	Uphold democracy	Supportive of democratic principles; resistant to corruption; integrity; high moral standards
	Work in team within and across parties	Team player; able to bargain effectively; able to stand ground but also to accept compromise

Discussion and Conclusion

On the basis of the criteria detailed above, the ideal candidate is someone with excellent interpersonal skills, who is able to fight for a cause and influence others while also being able to listen to others and negotiate compromises. He should also be an authentic representative with a genuine and demonstrable understanding of, and commitment to resolving, the concerns and problems faced by citizens. The job requires someone personable, with high levels of integrity and who can therefore earn the trust of the represented. Political nous is advantageous, but a strong background within politics is not a prerequisite. More important are the powers of communication and persuasion.

Using a first principles approach indicates that some of the existing criteria used to judge the quality of candidates may be inappropriate or of secondary importance. There is no evidence to sustain the hypothesis that candidates with higher incomes, for example, will be better representatives. Indeed, the loss of authenticity and voter trust engendered by a high income may be contraindicative to effective representation. While a career as a barrister – a popular choice for would-be politicians – may provide effective training in the art of verbal persuasion, it does not necessarily qualify a candidate any more than a number of other professions that all develop and demonstrate this skill, such as teachers, journalists, nurses, sales staff and so on. People can also develop this skill through non-professional activities, such as involvement in community, campaigning or charitable groups.

High levels of education may be useful when enacting a policy-making role, although the specialised nature of higher education means that representatives with degrees will still have fairly low levels of knowledge of most policy areas, thus conferring a relatively limited advantage on those with greater expertise. Higher education does, of course, provide numerous other skills that may be transferable to a political career, but so do other forms of training and experience, such as working in voluntary organisations, being involved in labour unions, participating in interest groups, or leading community groups and events. Even private roles, such as parenthood, can help to develop the interpersonal skills required for being an effective representative, such as listening, negotiating, communicating, asserting authority, and resolving conflict. Hence, an emphasis on elite qualifications and professional status is not a good measure of candidate quality. Formal political experience may provide insider knowledge that helps politicians to advance their careers more rapidly once elected (Allen 2013). But alternative forms of activism may be as effective in developing the necessary skills and may provide a candidate with greater authenticity and knowledge of the lived reality of her prospective constituents. In sum, many of the skills required to be a good representative fall outside the criteria commonly used by academics, parties and voters.

However – and this is a big caveat – the revised criteria remain difficult to measure objectively. Many of the requirements within the “person specification” are traits rather than objectively measurable qualities, and it has already been established that trait evaluations are subject to stereotyping and unconscious bias. Promoting criteria that are highly subjective as a model for meritocracy in political recruitment raises two dilemmas. First, the criteria invite non-meritocratic behaviour from selectors who might over-estimate the skills of more traditional candidates and under-estimate the qualities of outsider groups. Second, it is very

difficult to prove objectively whether this is the case, as the evaluations of a researcher are also vulnerable to subjectivity.

The task set out at the beginning of this paper – to develop alternative criteria for political recruitment that are objective, unbiased and meritocratic – therefore remains incomplete. Using a model based on first principles has helped to avoid the ingrained bias inherent in criteria based on the status quo. The criteria outlined are directly relevant to the requirements of representation, rather than being more spurious measures of social status or insider connections. As such, they represent a significant advance on previous models of candidate quality. They also highlight the limitations of current measures of candidate “merit”, and indicate that there may be many people possessing exactly the skills required to represent others who are currently being overlooked by party selectors as a result of a focus on the wrong selection criteria. Traditional pathways into politics are neither the only nor necessarily even the best means of recruiting quality candidates, and there is great potential for recognising alternative forms of qualification and proof of ability. Moving towards more meritocratic criteria may help to improve the quality of political representation at the same time as permitting a natural progression towards a more diverse, inclusive, descriptively and symbolically representative political class. However, further work is required to develop criteria that can be deployed by politicians, voters and researchers alike while avoiding the pitfalls of subjective evaluations and ingrained bias.

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