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What is a career politician? Theories, concepts, and measures

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept "career politician." It seeks to clarify, systematize, and measure this ambiguous multidimensional concept in order to facilitate testing theories and hypotheses associated with it. We argue that career politicians are full-time politicians who lack significant experience in the wider world and have other distinguishing attributes for which they are both appreciated and criticized. From claims and critiques put forward by political scientists, journalists, publics, and politicians, we extract four principal dimensions: Strong Commitment, Narrow Occupational Background, Narrow Life Experience, and Strong Ambition. These dimensions and their indicators fit Wittgenstein's family-resemblance conceptual structure, which is how we analyze, measure and validate them with data from a longitudinal study of British MPs spanning 1971–2016.

Keywords: career politician; professional politician; careerist; political class; political ambition; family-resemblance concepts

Introduction

The institutionalization and professionalization of legislatures in the second half of the twentieth century created politicians who, in Weber's (1946 [1919]) famous analysis, lived "for" politics and also "off" politics. "Career politicians", as King (1981) termed them, have since become a dominant and controversial presence across the liberal democratic world (Squire, 1993; Searing, 1994; Norris, 1997; Saalfeld, 1997; Shabad and Slomczynski, 2002; Cairney, 2007; Koop and Bittner, 2011; Heuwieser, 2018). Many academics believe such politicians are essential for effective governance (Best and Cotta, 2000, pp. 21–22; Shabad and Slomczynski, 2002; Fisher, 2014). Others believe their behavior fuels the "anti-politics" of national populism and undermines political legitimacy (Wright, 2013; Savoie, 2014; Allen, 2018; Clarke et al., 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019).

Cumulative research in this field has been greatly impeded, however, by conceptual confusion (Allen and Cairney, 2017). Career politicians are often vaguely and inconsistently distinguished from "professional politicians," "careerists," and "the political class." Sometimes these terms are used as synonyms. This paper aims to clarify the career-politician concept by identifying its principal dimensions, measuring them, and testing the validity of these measures so that they can be used with confidence in empirical research. We eschew "classic" concept construction and instead turn to Wittgenstein's (1953) "family resemblance" approach (see Goertz, 2006). We argue that "career politician" is best understood as a multidimensional concept in which the absence of some characteristics can be compensated by the presence of others.

After reviewing the academic literature and wider political discourse, we extract four principal dimensions. Career politicians are associated with strong vocational commitment and political ambition. They are also associated with having narrow occupational backgrounds and limited life experiences, but no particular characteristic seems either necessary or sufficient. From this viewpoint, we move beyond thinking about career politicians in binary terms. The dimensions associated with the concept are all continuous variables. We may use typologies and prototypes to discuss the subject, but being a career politician is clearly a matter of degree.

Finally, we develop measures of the four dimensions and validate them using a data set on British MPs. Career politicians may be found in any established political institution. Our focus on the British House of Commons is partly a reflection of the concept's initial association with UK politics (King, 1981; Riddell, 1996) but primarily a consequence of the rich data we have collected. A large number of MPs were interviewed in 1971–1974 and re-interviewed in 2012–2016.[1] The 1970 General Election was a watershed for the rise of full-time career politicians. MPs were now provided with staffing allowances and other benefits, and remunerated sufficiently to enable long-term careers (Norton, 1997, pp. 23–25; Rush and Cromwell, 2000, p. 488; Rush, 2001; Jun, 2003; Cairney, 2007; Allen, 2013; Langdon 2015). After 1970, these career politicians steadily replaced amateurs and part-timers (Riddell, 1996, pp. x–xi, 14). The virtue of our sample is that it includes many examples of each, which facilitates comparisons between them.

Our measures of career politicians draw on the interviews conducted in 1971–1974 (for convenience we refer to them as 1974). These involved 521 MPs, an 83% response rate. The face-to-face recorded and transcribed sessions lasted 90 minutes on average, ranging from 30 minutes to five hours. They included interviews, at the same response rate, with ministers and opposition frontbench spokesmen. All were given written guarantees of anonymity. The interviews probed parliamentary careers and psychological characteristics embedded in career performances. Respondents completed paper and pencil forms including a pre-parliamentary occupational history. For the present paper, we coded and added to this data information on MPs' pre-parliamentary occupations, years of service in the House of Commons, retirements, and circumstances of these retirements.

Theoretical claims and political critiques

Professional politicians were discovered by Weber (1946[1919]) and introduced to political scientists as "career politicians" by King (1981). Subsequent academic and popular treatments of the subject endorsed many of King's main points but reworked the term's focus (Rush, 1994, Riddell, 1996; 2011; Paxman, 2002; Oborne, 2007). Over time, the concept became increasingly multidimensional.

To identify the principal dimensions of "career politician," we apply a research design constructed by Goertz (2006). The first step is to examine how the term is used in academic and political discourse. The concept's principal dimensions can then be derived from these sources and reconstructed systematically without losing touch with the political worlds in which it lives. We approach this task by briefly considering positive and negative claims about career politicians.

Many of the positive claims about career politicians stem from students of legislative professionalization, who value committed, full-time politicians for their contributions to good governance (Polsby, 1968; Best and Cotta, 2000; King, 2000; Shabad and Slomczynski, 2002; Borchert, 2003; Borchert and Zeiss, 2003; MacKenzie, 2015).

For instance, the House of Commons' performance improved when professionals gradually replaced amateurs on the backbenches (King, 1981, p. 280). MPs now work harder for their constituents and pay more attention to citizens' needs and views (Riddell, 1996, p. 24; 2011,

[1]The 2012–2016 re-interviews provide perspectives on the career-politician concept but are not otherwise used in the measures and analyses in this paper.

p. 83; Squire, 2007). They also work harder on policy advocacy and oversight of the executive (King, 1981, p. 280; Searing, 1994; Norton, 1997, pp. 22–23, 27; Saalfeld, 1997, p. 44; Jun, 2003, pp. 168–69; Riddell, 2011, p. 83). They are said to be more assertive and independent than their predecessors (Smith, 1978; Rush and Cromwell, 2000, p. 489; Jun, 2003, p. 176; Allen and Cairney, 2017, p. 20; Heuwieser, 2018, p. 334; c.f. Kam, 2006; Hardman, 2018; O'Grady, 2019, p. 549).

Career politicians are also praised for bringing with them relevant political experience (Riddell, 1996, pp. 306–307; Jun, 2003, p. 175; Allen, 2013; 2018, pp. 54, 61; Fisher, 2014; Crewe, 2015, pp. 114–115). Many come from political apprenticeships and politically allied occupations like public relations, journalism, teaching, and academia. They understand arcane legislative rules and procedures (Squire, 2007), are disposed toward compromise (Riddell, 1996, pp. 270–271; Borchert, 2003, 20), and are able to digest information and presumably make better political judgments (Squire, 2007).

Other commentators, however, emphasize career politicians' lack of extra-political interests, knowledge, and experience (King, 2015, pp. 71–72). Their predecessors had been prominent industrialists, stockbrokers, landlords, successful barristers, leaders in other professions, manual workers, and trade-union officials. Most career politicians today have not had such experience. Some of them, recently branded as "ultra" career politicians, advance from political activism at university to become MPs' researchers, assistants, or think-tank staffers, and, soon after being elected themselves, expect preferment and promotion (Goplerud, 2015).

The narrow background of career politicians matters for several reasons. In the first place, it encourages middle-class homogeneity and excludes people and perspectives from diverse backgrounds (Allen, 2013; 2018; Durose et al., 2013; Abbott, 2015; Heath, 2015; King, 2015). It further reduces career politicians' experiential knowledge of other policy areas (Oborne, 2007; King and Crewe, 2014, p. 208; Kettle, 2015). Career politicians also have limited life experience in the real world. They lack maturity and judgment (Wright, 2013; Allen and Cairney, 2017; Clarke et al., 2018, pp. 104–105). They have little contextual understanding of the lives of ordinary citizens and are said to be "out of touch" (Wright, 2013; Crace, 2015; Lamprinakou et al., 2016, p. 208; Allen and Cairney, 2017; Allen and Cowley, 2018; Clarke et al., 2018, p. 2).

Career politicians have also been criticized for their strong ambition and for focusing less on the common good (Jackson, 1988; O'Grady, 2019, p. 545). They are Machiavellian and single-mindedly devoted to personal advancement (King, 1981, pp. 279, 283–284; Riddell, 1996, p. 278; Oborne, 2007; Allen and Cairney, 2017, pp. 18–19; Allen, 2018, pp. 36–37; Clarke et al., 2018, pp. 88–97). Publics in turn paint them as disingenuous, "not straight talkers," "twisters," and characters who generally "make promises they don't keep" (Borchert, 2003, pp. 8, 19; Wright, 2013; Allen and Cairney, 2017, p. 20; Allen, 2018, pp. 38–39; Clarke et al 2018, pp. 91–93).[2]

Definitions

Many of the positive and negative claims made about "career politicians" have also been applied to "the political class" and "professional politicians" (see Allen and Cairney, 2017; pp. 21–22; Allen, 2018, pp. 20–23; Allen and Cowley, 2018). This is partly because some commentators and researchers use the terms interchangeably, and partly because there is no consensus on how to distinguish among them. The inconsistent use of concepts and measures in much academic

[2]Many criticisms of career politicians could also apply to politicians in general, although a marked feature of the literature and discourse bemoaning politicians in general is a tendency to ascribe criticisms of politicians to the proliferation of career politicians. There is some evidence to suggest that citizens recognize the relevant experience of candidates who possess a political background (Campbell and Cowley, 2014). But while citizens talk a good deal about "career politicians," there is, as yet, no systematic study of how clearly citizens distinguish between career- and non-career politicians.

research confounds the comparison of findings (Allen and Cairney, 2017). Hence, before we extract the concept's principal dimensions and measure them, it is necessary to clarify who career politicians are.

Distinguishing career politicians from the political class is relatively straightforward. Allen and Cowley (2018, p. 222) use "political class" to refer to an unrepresentative group of elected politicians. Others define it more broadly to include MPs' assistants, lobbyists, political consultants, and staff in political parties and policy institutes (Jun, 2003, p. 170), executive appointees and judges (Borchert, 2003, pp. 5–6, 16), and even political journalists (Oborne, 2007). Whether drawn more widely or narrowly, the idea of a political class is nonetheless distinct from the idea of both career and professional politicians because it refers to an *aggregation* of disparate individuals who are likely to have different roles, drives, and motives.

The relationship between professional politicians and career politicians is less clear-cut. Allen and Cowley (2018) define "professional politicians" as those who enter legislatures from occupations in the political world. Both Borchert (2003) and Jun (2003) classify professional politicians as a sub-set of the political class, as individuals who perform their roles *full-time*. Complete commitment to their roles also distinguishes them from their amateur and part-time predecessors. This is how they are characterized in traditional studies of professionalization and institutionalization (Polsby, 1968; King, 1981, pp. 277–278; Matthews, 1984; Squire, 1993; Best and Cotta, 2000; Rush and Cromwell, 2000, p. 490; Borchert and Zeiss, 2003; Cairney, 2007).

The next step requires some context. The term "professional politician" was used in studies of legislative professionalization long before the rise of "career politicians," which most observers backdate to the 1970s. King (1981) substituted this new term for professional politician in an essay on the changing profile of British politicians. Just like the professional politician in institutionalization and professionalization studies, King's (1981, pp. 250–251) career politician was committed to and aspired to be in politics full-time. But beginning with Riddell's (1996) influential book 15 years later, three important dimensions were added, two of which are often regarded as more important than commitment. Since Riddell, this more multifaceted conceptualization of "career politician" has become increasingly commonplace in academic and public discourse.

Since the key marker for professional politicians is that they are full-time, all professional politicians must be counted as at least partial career politicians because they share the career politician's commitment attribute. To the extent that some professional politicians also satisfy one or more of the three newer definitional dimensions, they become stronger career politicians (career politician is a continuous variable) and are more likely to be so branded by researchers, commentators, and members of the public (Squire, 2007). Many people use the terms interchangeably. While this may be imprecise, it is not entirely incorrect.

The career politician: four fundamental dimensions

Applying Goertz's (2006) principles of concept formation, we treat "career politician" as a multidimensional concept whose components must be justified by normative claims about their political importance and causal claims about their consequences. From our review of the literature and political discourse, four dimensions stand out: Strong Commitment, Narrow Occupational Background, Narrow Life Experience, and Strong Ambition.

These dimensions can then be considered within a three-level framework (Goertz, 2006, pp. 6–7, 60). The "basic level," the first column in Figure 1, is the concept itself – career politician – used for making theoretical and empirical claims about consequences. The "secondary level," the second column, identifies the concept's fundamental dimensions. The "indicator level," the third column, lists each dimension's operationalizations. The basic and secondary levels are sufficiently abstract to enable theory building in comparative analysis. The indicator level can accommodate cross-national differences in accessible data (Goertz, 2006, p. 64). Our

Basic Level (Concept)	Secondary Level (Dimensions)	Indicator Level (Measures)
Career Politician	Strong Commitment	Duration (years in the House of Commons)
		Intensity (weekly hours spent on parliamentary activities)
		Revocability (likelihood of voluntary retirement from Parliament)
	Narrow Occupational Background	Pre-parliamentary career (predominant occupation)
		Years in pre-parliamentary career
	Narrow Life Experience	Age at entry to the House of Commons
	Strong Ambition	Strength of desire for further positions
		Likelihood of achieving further positions

Figure 1. Career politician concept.

data, as noted in the introduction, come from interviews with British MPs in the 1970s, supplemented with information on their pre-parliamentary occupations and subsequent careers, and re-interviews four decades later.

Commitment

During the re-interviews, we asked a former minister: "What does the phrase 'career politician' mean to you?" In his mind it was simple: "It means someone who thinks politics is their life." When King (1981) coined the term that is exactly what he meant too.[3] Career politicians do not regard politics as a short-term interlude in varied careers (Jun, 2003, p. 174). Politics is their occupation and preoccupation, their vocation, as Weber saw it (King, 1981, pp. 250–255; Riddell, 1996, p. 7; Oborne, 2007, p. 326). Career politicians are committed to politics as a full-time, *life-time* occupation (Riddell, 1996, pp. 2–7). They work very hard and for very long hours. They rule out voluntary retirement to pursue other careers (King, 1981, pp. 250–255).

In Table 1 below, we present measures for three aspects of commitment: duration, intensity, and revocability.

Since nearly all the 1974 interviewees were either deceased, retired, or on the cusp of retirement by 2016, it is possible to use behavioral indicators across their entire careers to assess degrees of commitment. *Duration* is measured by the total number of years each MP served in the House of Commons. It distinguishes those for whom politics has actually been a lifetime occupation and serves as a proxy for vocational tenacity, a personal characteristic associated with commitment as a "calling." Table 1 shows that there is a wide range of duration: 9% left in 10 or fewer years, and nearly 1 out of 4 did not stay beyond 15 years, not enough for a lifetime's vocation, which might

[3]Most discussions of career politicians focus on members of legislatures, but career politicians are found in other institutions as well, for example, political parties and local government.

Table 1 The Strong Commitment dimension

Duration		
Years in the house of commons	Percentage	Frequency
1–5	5.2	27
6–10	3.6	19
11–15	14.2	74
16–20	19.0	99
21–25	16.5	86
26–30	20.2	105
31–35	13.2	69
36–40	5.6	29
>40	2.5	13
Total	*100.0*	*521*
Intensity		
Weekly hours spent on parliamentary activities	Percentage	Frequency
<31	3.1	10
31–40	6.1	20
41–50	14.7	48
51–60	26.7	87
61–70	22.4	73
71–80	13.8	45
>80	13.2	43
Total	*100.0*	*326*
Revocability		
Likelihood of voluntary retirement from Parliament	Percentage	Frequency
Very likely	11.8	58
Likely	6.9	34
Somewhat likely	19.4	95
Unlikely	3.3	16
Not before retirement age	42.1	206
No, never!	16.5	81
Total	*100.0*	*490*

require 25 years or more – one could enter around age 40 and retire at 65 or later still, which 42% did.[4]

Intensity of commitment is measured by total time spent on parliamentary activities inside and outside Westminster. This information was obtained on a form completed by the 1974 interviewees. Time spent inside the House of Commons ("during a typical week when the House is in session") included specific estimates for time in standing and select committees, in the Chamber, on constituency work, party meetings, and other (lobby, dining room, etc.). Time spent outside the House was divided into constituency and party work, and other work, which for ministers included their long hours in Whitehall. The modal estimate for total time engaged with the career in a typical week was between 51 and 60 hours. Nine percent reported 40 hours or less, as in a 9–5

[4]Duration focuses directly on the *structure* of the career but not directly on the *psychology* of commitment, which was also of upmost importance to King (1981) and Riddell (1996). Some MPs might start out with the *intention* to pursue politics as a lifetime career, but then, through no fault of their own, lose their seats. Still, we would argue that the more that politics actually is a lifetime occupational experience for an MP, the more likely the MP is to understand it as a vocation, in Weber's terms, as a commitment with a "calling." Although duration concentrates on structure, it is also a proxy for vocational *tenacity*, a key psychological aspect of commitment. For example, most of those who lost their seats did not try to attain others, while some of those with the longest tenure did lose their seats at some point and then sought and attained others. To investigate duration's efficacy, we used our two validity tests, which showed that duration is the strongest of the three commitment measures, stronger even than revocability (rejection of voluntary retirement), which King regarded as a litmus test for commitment. Moreover, duration is the only one of the three commitment measures that can be used in cross-national, non-interview research.

job, while nearly half put their estimate at 60 hours or more, which is what some academics who see their own careers as vocations might claim.

Revocability of commitment is measured by two questions in the 1974 interviews: "How likely is it that you might voluntarily retire from Parliament?" and "What would be the reasons for this?" This measure assesses their intentions at the time of the interviews and whether alternative careers were at least considered as possibilities.[5] Sixty-two percent of respondents were not planning voluntary retirements. We also coded a behavioral measure, which could be used where interview data are not available, of what these MPs actually did over the ensuing decades.[6] In the end, four out of five stayed the course. Although there is a good deal of measurement error in the behavioral indicator, it nevertheless has a significant correlation (at the 0.05 level) with MPs' 1974 responses to the interview questions.

Occupational background

While King (1981) regarded Strong Commitment as the paramount defining attribute of a career politician, other political scientists and commentators have emphasized a general "lack of real-world experience" (Riddell, 1996). During recent decades, attention has increasingly focused on pre-parliamentary occupational backgrounds for which there is often readily available data.

Narrow Occupational Background relates to a particular part of experience in the wider world. What do politicians who have held "real jobs" learn through their occupational experiences about the everyday lives of ordinary citizens? In most cases, not much. But they do acquire sectoral policy expertise, and they may develop valuable management experience. Thus, former miners who go into politics will bring with them knowledge about the mining industry, while soldiers, farmers, and business people will bring with them knowledge about the armed forces, farming, and business, respectively.

Because they have not held such "real jobs," career politicians are said to lack practical, common-sense, experiential knowledge about policy areas (Oborne, 2007; King and Crewe, 2014, p. 208; Kettle, 2015). They are poorly equipped, it is said, to evaluate legislation or, as ministers, to test the advice of civil servants (Groves, 2012; Savoie, 2014; Allen, 2018; Hardman, 2018, p. xiv). Furthermore, lack of significant managerial experience in commerce or industry impairs the career politician's preparation for ministerial office. They just do not "know how to run things" (Cavendish, 2010).

Pre-parliamentary career is our first indicator of Narrow Occupational Background. In 1974, MPs were asked to correct an occupational history form listing their pre-parliamentary occupations. We began with these corrected forms and worked with more recent published sources to ascertain their post-education careers.

In Table 2, we list MPs' predominant pre-parliamentary occupations and the number of MPs who pursued each. Following Cairney's (2007) widely used classifications, these occupations are divided into three groups: "Political" (Cairney's "Instrumental"), "Politically conscious" (Cairney's "Brokerage"), and "Non-political" (Cairney's "Proper Jobs").

[5]Henn (2018) believes commitment is best measured in this way, but it can also be measured by inference from behavioral indicators such as unsuccessfully contesting seats before first election, or trying to stand again after losing an election.

[6]MPs were coded as having had a Revocable commitment to their political career if they (a) announced their voluntary retirement before age 51 at final exit, thus giving themselves time for another career, or (b) by the circumstances of their exit: election defeat, de-selection, or constituency abolished before age 51 – and no attempt to seek or achieve new nominations. By contrast, we took as evidence of an Irrevocable commitment, which best fits the image of politics as a vocation, meeting any one of the following criteria: (a) no early retirement: announced voluntary retirement after age 55 at final exit; (b) involuntary early retirement: final exit due to death or illness; (c) circumstances of exit: election defeat, de-selection, or constituency abolished before age 51, and sought but failed to achieve a new nomination; (d) election defeat, de-selection, constituency abolished, after age 60 at final exit.

Table 2. Narrow Occupational Background: pre-parliamentary career

Predominant occupation	Percentage	Frequency
Political occupations		
1. Assistant to an MP	0.6	3
2. Party worker	2.7	14
3. Political researcher	0.9	5
4. Full-time local councilor	0.4	2
5. Lobbyist/Political consultant	0.2	1
Total	*4.8*	*25*
Politically conscious occupations		
6. Trade-union official	4.2	22
7. Public relations/Advertising	3.1	16
8. Journalism/Media	7.3	38
9. Barrister/Solicitor	14.6	76
10. Lecturer/Teacher	9.8	51
11. Civil servant/Charity sector	3.3	17
Total	*42.3*	*220*
Non-political occupations		
12. Corporation (Director/Executive)	3.6	19
13. Small business (Proprietor/Manager)	13.0	68
14. Non-executive company director	0.0	0
15. Stockbroker/Banker	1.7	9
16. Medical doctor	1.5	8
17. Architect/Civil engineer pilot	0.4	2
18. Actor	0.2	1
19. Accountant/Insurance broker	2.7	14
20. Industrial scientist/Business consultant	1.1	6
21. Engineer/Auctioneer	4.8	25
22. Manual worker/Miner/Ship Steward	3.6	19
23. Skilled worker/Craftsman	3.8	20
24. Clerical worker/Commercial traveler/Nurse	6.1	32
25. Military career	1.7	9
26. Farmer/Landowner/Forrester	3.4	18
27. "Genuine Toffs"/Landed gentry/Aristocrats	3.6	19
28. Non-politician's spouse	0.8	4
29. Clergy	0.2	1
Total	*52.2*	*274*
30. None	0.2	1
Total	*100.0*	*521*

"Political occupations" are those directly related to politics like assistant to an MP, a lobbyist, a party worker, or a researcher at party offices. "Politically conscious occupations" are not directly political but are close to politics and provide perspectives, training, and windows into political careers (Jun, 2003, p. 173). Many of their practitioners are in touch with political worlds or follow developments in them regularly. These include occupations like trade-union official, public relations, journalism, and barrister. Finally, "Non-political occupations" cover a wide variety of "real jobs" in sectors where most "ordinary people" work: corporations, small businesses, engineering, clerical work, construction, mining, or farming.

In 1974, politicians who had pursued only political occupations were 4.8% of the sample. Adding the intermediate politically-conscious category produces a total of 47%. Finally, MPs with Non-Political backgrounds are 52%.

Years in pre-parliamentary career is our second indicator of Narrow Occupational Background. For this measure, we simply aggregated the number of years that MPs in our sample had spent working in their predominant pre-parliamentary occupation. As Table 3 shows, just under 1-in-10 MPs had spent up to 5 years in their predominant career, while just over 1-in-3 had accumulated 16 years' experience or more. The majority of MPs (just over 54%) had spent between 6 and 15 years in their predominant pre-parliamentary occupation.

Table 3. Narrow Occupational Background: years in pre-parliamentary career

Years spent working in predominant occupation	Percentage	Frequency
0–5	9.2	48
6–10	26.8	139
11–15	27.6	143
16–20	16.6	86
21–25	8.1	42
26–30	5.8	30
31–35	4.6	24
36–40	1.3	7
Total	*100.0*	*519*

These measures refine and strengthen the data on predominant occupations. The more years that MPs have spent in their predominant pre-parliamentary career, the more likely they are to bring into Parliament substantial experiential, common-sense knowledge of that policy sector, and, quite often, serious managerial experience.

General life experience

To many citizens, being a career politician is synonymous with being "out of touch." Career politicians are allegedly unaware of the difficulties and challenges in citizens' everyday lives because they lack familiarity with citizens' significant social, economic, and personal life experiences (Wright, 2013, pp. 451; Clarke et al., 2018, pp. 104–107, 204–207).

Many people expect to see in their politicians something like Aristotle's (1925) "practical wisdom," a leadership trait that enables political leaders to comprehend and pursue the well-being of ordinary people and the political community, a leadership trait learned through decades of life experiences. As a former British MP, Tony Wright (2013, p. 452) observed about career politicians:

> They are certainly clever . . . but this does not make them wise. Nor does it compensate for a deficiency of experience of other walks and conditions of life that might inform their political judgments. When people say they think politicians are "out of touch", these are the sort of considerations they have in mind.

Before the 1970s, many politicians did not enter parliament till middle age, having experienced decades of adult life in "the real world." Contemporary career politicians, by contrast, enter earlier (Jun, 2003, p. 174). Since national politics is no longer part-time, significant life experiences beyond the "political bubble" must be absorbed before politicians enter parliament (King, 2015, pp. 71–72).

Today's career politicians have not done so, and yet expect to rise quickly to ministerial office (Allen, 2013). Their growing numbers have created concerns that governments are being run by unseasoned young adults (Clarke et al., 2018, pp. 206–210).

For a proxy indicator of Narrow Life Experience, we use *age at entry to the House of Commons*, as in Table 4, which measures the opportunity for having shared or encountered significant life experiences in the wider world beyond politics.[7] Ten percent of respondents in the 1974 sample first entered the House when they were age 30 or younger. If we take age 35 as the marker for early entry, the numbers rise to 32%.

[7]Age of entry has been used in several studies (Kam, 2006; Henn, 2018; O'Grady, 2019), and it does pass the validation tests below, but it needs to be replaced where possible with more direct and better focused measures.

Table 4. Narrow Life Experience: age at entry to the House of Commons

Age at entry	Percentage	Frequency
<31	9.6	50
31–35	21.9	114
36–40	27.3	142
41–45	21.1	110
46–50	11.9	62
>50	8.2	43
Total	*100.0*	*521*

Because the career-politician concept's dimensions overlap in academic and public discourse, some overlap among indicators is unavoidable, and therefore some theoretically justified "double-counting" is required. For example, many politicians who enter in middle age with plenty of life experience, and having had "proper jobs," are nevertheless regarded as career politicians because they are deeply committed to the career and have very strong ambition. Classic career politicians who enter parliament *early* with similarly strong ambitions and commitments should, in light of their lack of non-political occupational and general life experiences, score higher on any summary index.

Ambition

Characterizations of career politicians also emphasize their sometimes excessive ambition (King, 2000; Rush, 2001, pp. 135–137). Career politicians are said to stand out by the strength of their desire for power and fame (King, 1981, p, 282; White, 1983; Oborne, 2007, p. 33; Goplerud, 2015; O'Grady, 2019, p. 551; Riddell, 1996, p. 28; Allen and Cowley, 2018). This single-minded motivation travels well cross-nationally because many career politicians share a vulnerability: if they lose office in middle age, they may have few other skills with which to pursue alternative careers offering comparable status or even income (McAllister, 1997, p. 20; Wessels, 1997, pp. 76–77; Roberts, 2017; c.f. Mattozzi and Merlo, 2008).

Because career politicians are so driven by ambition, they concentrate on the game of politics (Wright, 2013, p. 449; Sieberer and Müller, 2017). They want to make a mark to advance their careers. They want laws enacted quickly, push for immediate results, take short-term perspectives, and neglect underlying problems (King and Crewe, 2014). Moreover, they have inadequate public-service orientations, for their strong ambitions lead them to "see politics as a career move rather than a call to public service" (Blears, 2008).

Data on the desire for office are available from transcribed answers to two questions in the 1974 interviews (Table 5). The first question was: "And finally, your own plans? Are there any further positions in the House that you would like to seek sometime in the future? If 'Yes,' and position is left unspecified, then 'What position might this be?'" The next question was: "What would you say are your chances of achieving (highest position mentioned)?"

These were non-attribution interviews with written guarantees, conducted at a time when non-attribution was taken very seriously. Some respondents were reserved, but most seemed to answer frankly.[8]

Strength of desire for further positions

In response to the first question, nearly all those desiring further positions, that is, those we judge to be career politicians to some extent, specified posts ranging from whips to cabinet ministers. On

[8]Macdonald (1987) has shown that the measures predict, strongly and consistently, promotions from the backbenches to ministerial positions. They are also significantly related to attitudes and behaviors that would be expected of ambitious backbenchers (Searing, 1994). These findings support the measures' validity.

Table 5. The Strong Ambition dimension

Strength of desire for further positions		
Strength of desire	Percentage	Frequency
Very strong	6.1	30
Strong	27.6	135
Moderate	10.2	50
Weak – Involuntary	19.9	97
Weak – Voluntary	4.5	22
No – Involuntary	19.9	97
No – Voluntary	10.4	51
Absolutely not!	1.4	7
Total	*100.0*	*489*
Likelihood of achieving further positions		
Perceived likelihood	Percentage	Frequency
Very good	5.4	23
Fairly good	12.7	54
Modestly optimistic	5.7	24
Uncertain	18.4	78
Very small	9.2	39
No chance	5.0	21
No further position desired	43.6	185
Total	*100.0*	*424*

the basis of these discussions, strength of desire was coded from "Absolutely not" to "Very strong." The last of these categories included respondents who said they would leave the Commons if a position was not forthcoming, a mindset associated with "ultra" career politicians. Those whose self-reported ambitions ran from "No" to "Weak" were further coded for the reasons behind their static ambition: involuntary (age, expects to lose seat, leader would never appoint me) and voluntary (other stronger commitments to family, business, or constituents). Both provided the basis for the summary code of strength of desire for further position presented in the table. Thirty-four percent expressed strong or very strong desires for further positions, with career politicians presumably among them.

Likelihood of achieving further position

For *excessive* ambition, responses to the second question are instructive: those who believe their chances of achieving further positions are very good or even fairly good (18%) will, according to Schlesinger's (1966) ambition theory, be more determined than those who want further positions but see their chances as uncertain, very small or negligible (33%) (see also Sieberer and Müller, 2017). At the very least, responses to this second question help weed out those who are less serious about promotion.

From the political-science literature and political discourse about career politicians, we have extracted four fundamental dimensions: Strong Commitment, Narrow Occupational Background, Narrow Life Experience, and Strong Ambition, and eight indicators of these dimensions. Now we consider how to handle them.

Career politician: a family resemblance concept

The classic approach to defining concepts relies upon necessary and sufficient conditions (Goertz, 2006). Each of the concept's dimensions must be necessary for the concept's definition, all of them together being sufficient to define the concept. Not many social-science concept definitions fully meet these stringent criteria. But "career politician" is a worse fit than most. It has been stretched

(Sartori, 1970) to cover an ever-wider variety of cases, while the spotlight has shifted from one definitional dimension to another.

The consequence of decades of thinking with exemplars and conceptual stretching is that none of the concept's four dimensions is absolutely necessary to identify a career politician, which violates the key requirement for classic concept definitions. Each dimension has notable exceptions, that is, individuals who do not fit its criterion but who most observers would recognize as career politicians because they display one or more of the other dimensions.

Let us consider examples:

Dimension 1: Strong Commitment

Everyone recognizes early-entry, "ultra" career politicians as members of the conceptual family (Kam, 2006; Goplerud, 2015; Henn, 2018; Heuwieser, 2018; O'Grady, 2019), but it is not clear they have long-term commitments to their parliamentary careers (Dimension 1). If they do not rise quickly or, having risen, doubt their opportunities for further preferment, they may leave politics to pursue careers in other fields (Mattozzi and Merlo, 2008). Prominent examples in British politics include David Cameron, George Osborne, Nick Clegg, and David Miliband: "Here today, gone tomorrow politicians," as a 2016 re-interviewee put it. Nevertheless, they were recognized as career politicians because they lacked occupational and life experiences and displayed very strong ambitions for office.

Dimensions 2 and 3: Narrow Occupational Background and Narrow Life Experience

There are plenty of examples in Britain of MPs – figures like Cecil Parkinson, Norman Tebbitt, Vince Cable, and Chris Huhne – who are recognized as career politicians but who entered Parliament after age 40 and had significant occupational and general life experiences outside politics. Despite not satisfying Dimensions 2 and 3, they are seen as career politicians because they fit the profiles for commitment and strong ambition.

Dimension 4: Strong Ambition

Many professional politicians lack strong ambitions for ministerial office (Dimension 4) and yet are counted as career politicians because they work as full-time "constituency members" and "policy advocates" (Searing, 1994) and are in politics for the long haul. The Labour MPs Dennis Skinner and Tam Dalyell were career politicians because of robust commitments to their parliamentary careers. A limited number also enter early without much experience in the wider world (Dimensions 2 and 3).

In sum, "career politician" does not fit the requirements of classic concepts: none of its four fundamental dimensions seems absolutely necessary to the categorization. How then can we measure the concept and identify career politicians systematically?

Actually, there is "more or less consensus" on recognizing career politicians when we see them, but it is difficult to understand where this "more or less consensus" comes from. We suggest it comes from intuitive applications of Wittgenstein's (1953) "family resemblance" structure to the concept.

The key difference between classic and family-resemblance concepts is *substitutability*: necessary conditions do not have substitutes in classic concepts, but the absence of some conditions can be compensated for by the presence of others in family-resemblance concepts (Goertz, 2006, p. 45). All that is required is reaching the point of sufficient resemblance to recognize a case as part of the conceptual family.

There may be no attribute that all members of the category share. Instead, one can focus on single attributes or on different combinations of attributes, as we intuitively do when recognizing

members of families by different combinations of key features like hair color, body type, facial structure, gait, or skin tone (Collier and Mahon, 1993). For example, we may recognize person A as a member of family Q by her possession of three characteristics out of four: 1, 2, and 3, but not 4. But we may also recognize person B as a member of this same family Q by her possession of any two, or even one, of characteristics 1, 2, 3, and 4. In other words, neither characteristic 1, 2, 3 nor 4 is absolutely necessary to establish membership of family Q, because different sub-sets of these characteristics may be sufficient (Goertz, 2006).

The strength of the family-resemblance structure is that secondary conceptual levels (see Figure 1) can, with some substitutability, enable theory building in comparative analysis, while further substitutability at the indicator level can accommodate cross-national differences in available data (Goertz, 2006, p. 64). This structure also keeps the career politician concept close to its usage in political discourse, which protects its political significance and facilitates explanation.

Re-constructing the concept from the dimensions

The key to using the career-politician dimensions is that (a) most political scientists and commentators would likely consider all four relevant, even if they themselves focus on only one or two, and (b) even though many treat the classification as a binary choice, we are in fact dealing with a continuous variable. Any one dimension *may* be sufficient to recognize whether or not person A is a member of career-politician conceptual family Q. But to measure *how much* of a career politician person A is, it is desirable to utilize as many dimensions as possible.

We have therefore integrated all four dimensions into a single index, which is summarized in online Appendix Table 1. By using more information than most political scientists and commentators, we integrate their collective understandings and improve the validity of our measures

One problem with creating aggregate-level indices is that not all components are measured on the same scale. In our case, the challenge consists of adding together continuous (e.g., age of entry to parliament), ordinal (e.g., strength of ambition for office), and categorical (e.g., type of pre-parliamentary occupation) variables.

To construct a composite index using the career-politician dimensions, we begin by standardizing and adding together each constituent measure for each dimension. For the Strong Commitment dimension, for example, we apply this procedure to the duration, intensity, and revocability indicators. We again standardize the composite measure to create our final index for this dimension. This step ensures that the overall index remains centered at zero, measuring the number of standard deviations that each politician deviates from that mean. We thereby obtain the following standardized score for each MP's commitment:

$$x[i]_{commitment} = Standardize\left(\frac{x[i]_{years} - \overline{x}_{years}}{\sigma_{years}} + \frac{x[i]_{hours} - \overline{x}_{hours}}{\sigma_{hours}} + \frac{x[i]_{retire} - \overline{x}_{retire}}{\sigma_{retire}}\right)$$

We apply the same strategy to the Narrow Occupational Background, Narrow Life Experience, and Strong Ambition dimensions.

Composite career-politician index

We used the same basic approach to build our overall composite career politician index, which is the standardized sum of our four different dimensional indices. The standardized overall composite index is thus defined as:

$$x[i]_{career\ politician} = Standardize\left(x[i]_{commitment} + x[i]_{occupation} + x[i]_{experience} + x[i]_{ambition}\right)$$

Table 6. Validity Test 1: T-tests of standardized composite index, component indices, and 1st PC weighted scores for ministers and backbenchers

Metric	Composite index	Component indices				
		Commitment	Occupation	Experience	Ambition	1st PC
Standardized mean scores, backbenchers	−0.145	−0.071	−0.108	−0.154	−0.175	−0.145
Standardized mean scores, ministers	0.74	0.319	0.387	0.556	0.72	0.743
T-Statistic	−6.862	−2.679	−5.176	−8.11	−8.147	−6.961
P-value	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
N Backbenchers	230	262	406	408	341	230
N Ministers	45	58	113	113	83	45

Note that this approach gives each of the four dimensions an equal impact on our final composite index scores. Some might argue that equal weights are an inappropriate modeling choice, because recent studies have tended to place a greater emphasis on career politicians' occupational backgrounds and life experiences over their commitment and ambition (Henn, 2018; Heuwieser, 2018; O'Grady, 2019). It is difficult, however, to determine exactly how to weight the dimensions. As an exploratory robustness check, we made qualitative judgments to weight them in a parallel measure that can be found in the online Appendix. As a further robustness check, we extracted the first principal component (1st PC) from our eight indicator-level measures and used its dimension weights as an alternative to our unweighted composite career-politician index. In validations matching those reported below and reported in the online Appendix, both robustness checks produced strikingly similar results to those with our "agnostic" unweighted composite career-politician index.

Validity tests

Recent quantitative investigations use occupational background and age at entry as indicators of "career politician" (Kam, 2006; Goplerud, 2015; Henn, 2018; Heuwieser, 2018; O'Grady, 2019) despite some uncertainty about their validity (Heuwieser, 2018, pp. 316; 320–321). We report validity tests for these two indicator dimensions and for the other two we use to measure the concept.

As a first validity test of each dimension, we compare the standardized scores for MPs who served as ministers and those who remained on the backbenches. If the indicators work as expected, scores for ministers should be consistently higher, as it is well-established that ministers are more likely to be career politicians than are backbenchers (Koop and Bittner, 2011; Cowley, 2012; Allen, 2013; Goplerud, 2015; Allen and Cairney, 2017, p. 23). In practice, this test is even more demanding than it first appears. Those counted as ministers embrace everyone in our sample who held ministerial office, including junior ministers who had little prospect for further advancement (Searing, 1994), and indifferent career politicians who served in pre-1970 governments (King, 2015, pp. 62–63).

The results summarized in Table 6 are impressive. In each paired comparison, ministers show a higher standardized mean score than backbenchers on our composite career-politician index and on our 1st PC weighted scores measure, as well as for each separate dimension. In each case, the difference is significant at the 0.05 level based on our obtained t-statistics. The large gap between ministers' and backbenchers' Ambition standardized mean scores is striking but perhaps not surprising: MPs who became ministers are more likely to have desired high office than those who remained on the backbenches. The differences for the Commitment, Occupation, and Experience indices are somewhat smaller but still significant and in line with expectations.

Table 7. Validity Test 2: T-tests of standardized composite index, component indices, and 1st PC weighted scores for career politicians listed by either King or Riddell

		Component indices				
Metric	Composite index	Commitment	Occupation	Experience	Ambition	1st PC
Standardized mean scores, non-listed	−0.157	−0.072	−0.108	−0.131	−0.111	−0.157
Standardized mean scores, listed	0.897	0.419	0.552	0.672	0.638	0.895
T-Statistic	−8.273	−3.088	−5.972	−9.093	−5.722	−8.071
P-value	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
N Non-listed	234	273	434	436	361	234
N Listed	41	47	85	85	63	41

To assess the magnitude of our obtained differences, recall that the composite and four component indices are measured in terms of standard deviations from a zero-centered mean. For normally distributed data, about 34% of observations fall within one standard deviation above the mean. This fact allows us to assign percentile values capturing the share of observations that fall above (and below) our obtained standardized mean scores for both ministers and backbenchers.

Focusing on the composite career-politician index, we fail to reject the null-hypothesis ($p > 0.1$) in a conventional Shapiro–Wilk test, indicating that this index could have been drawn from an approximately normal distribution. We take this, and the approximately normal shapes of the density and QQ-plots of our index (shown in the online Appendix), as evidence that we can apply the above rule to our indicators.

Substantively, we are thus able to recover approximate percentiles for the mean scores of backbenchers and ministers, respectively. Based on their standardized mean in the second column of Table 6, backbenchers (−0.145) score an average value at the 44th percentile of all MPs. This means that the average career-politician score for backbenchers lies above 44% and below 56% among all MPs. This is to be expected because backbenchers should be a fairly random mix of career and non-career politicians. More importantly, the mean score for ministers (0.74) lies at the 77th percentile value on the career-politician index. This means that the average minister in our sample has a higher career-politician score than 77% of all MPs – strong substantive evidence that the composite index accurately measures the career-politician concept.

Our second validity test focuses on career politicians identified by King (1981; 2015) and Riddell (1996; 2011), the most knowledgeable academic and journalistic contributors to the subject. Again, this is a demanding test because King's primary focus on commitment meant that he might have excluded those who received low scores on this dimension but high scores on the other dimensions. Moreover, there are certainly some career politicians in the 1974 sample who were not named by King or Riddell and who are therefore included among our "non-listed politicians," that is, non-career politicians.

Table 7 reports standardized mean scores for the career politicians identified by King and Riddell and those who were not identified by either author.[9] All the differences in means are again significant at the 0.05 level based on our obtained t-statistics. Like the results in Table 6, the differences suggest our various component and composite indices capture well the degree to which an MP is a career politician. The dimensions that are most widely used by other researchers, Occupational Background and Life Experience, perform well, while even the weakest performing dimension, Commitment, still produces significant differences. Crucially, this dimension adds valuable information to our composite career-politician index, which again outperforms each

[9]It is not a problem if King and Riddell were inconsistent in their use of "professional politician" and "career politician." Professional politicians belong in our measure because all of them at least score on commitment, one of the four dimensions, and many will score on others as well.

individual dimension. The composite and 1st PC indices again produce the largest differences in means between both groups. Moreover, both these measures produce an impressive mean score for named career politicians at the 82nd percentile of the entire sample. The composite index, in other words, captures more than the sum of its component parts.

Conclusion

Career politicians are recognized by distinctive attributes for which they are both appreciated and criticized in academic and political discourse. From these sources, we extracted four fundamental dimensions of the career-politician concept: Strong Commitment, Narrow Occupational Background, Narrow Life Experience, and Strong Ambition.

We clarified the concept's structure and measured its dimensions in order to strengthen the foundation for testing theories and hypotheses associated with it. We treated "career politician" as a multi-level, multidimensional concept that fits Wittgenstein's family-resemblance structure. This structure helps explain why many observers and researchers can confidently identify career politicians using only one dimension. Yet, when they do so, they may capture sub-types that diverge somewhat from others. For example, professional politicians are career politicians, but they may be only partial career politicians because, although they have full-time commitments to their careers (one of the concept's four dimensions), they may not share the other three dimensions. To the extent that they do, they are more complete career politicians; to the extent that they do not, they constitute a sub-type.

With interview data, supplemented with information on pre-parliamentary occupations and parliamentary career patterns, we measured each of the concept's four dimensions with indicators that passed several validity tests: distinguishing between ministers and backbenchers, and between career politicians (named by two expert observers) and the other MPs in the sample. Our composite indices performed best, but each of the four dimensions also produced predicted mean scores. Occupational Background and Life Experience had more impact than Commitment, the oldest and more traditionally accentuated marker. Ambition provided quite strong results, but in the King–Riddell validation, it too was outdone by Life Experience. Compared to Occupational Background, Life Experience was considerably stronger in both validations. Thus, the results demonstrate the importance of the two variables, Occupational Background and Life Experience, that are most often used in empirical studies.

The clarified basic concept and its four dimensions are sufficiently abstract to enable theory building in comparative analysis, while the indicator level can accommodate differences in available data. For cross-national research, we have identified behavioral measures that do not require difficult-to-collect interview data: duration and revocability (see n. 6) for Commitment; types and length of pre-parliamentary careers for Occupational Background; and age at entry for Life Experience. Meanwhile, behavioral measures of Ambition can be imputed using Schlesinger's (1966) theory of ambition and opportunity structures.

Two broader points arise from our clarification and operationalization of the career-politician concept. The first relates to our use of the family-resemblance structure. There are other ambiguous multidimensional concepts prominent in everyday political discourse that help political actors navigate political developments, and help political scientists explain them, but which, like "career politician," are difficult to define and measure with classic principles of concept formation. Wittgenstein's family-resemblance approach can potentially unlock some of them and facilitate their investigation.

The second point relates to the substantive focus of the paper. Political scientists still have a great deal to do in terms of examining the impact of career politicians on policy and national political life. It is important to examine more fully not just the behavior of career politicians but also what it is about career politicians – their commitment, experiences and ambition – that affects policy and politics. It is doubly important to investigate the topic in an era of national

populism, when it has become fashionable in most western democracies to regard career politicians as "pariah politicians" (Borchert, 2003, pp. 8, 19). Better empirical knowledge can help us evaluate the claims made for and against them and whether active measures might be needed to reduce their numbers.

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