

What makes a good politician?

Jo Silvester talks to Jon Sutton on the eve of the General Election

You've conducted a lot of research into the selection process for MPs, and helped ensure that major political parties are putting the right mix in front of the public at the polling stations. Do you have faith in the system now?

There's still a long way to go. I think we've made a good start in beginning to look more systematically at the qualities required by MPs, and by helping to create robust, objective and transparent selection processes. But a bigger question is what do we mean by the 'right mix'? Are we interested in who the politicians are or what they bring to the role? Does it matter whether they come from particular groups or are we more interested in whether they are capable of performing the role well? And what do we mean by being an 'effective MP'? You can see that there are quite a few interesting challenges. Psychologists have ignored the work of politicians, so we are only at the beginning of being able to answer some of these questions.

It wasn't until 1867 that men who didn't own land could become MPs, and even modern political parties rarely change their selection processes. Why do you think they started to turn to psychologists such as yourself?

I got involved in politics by accident. I presented a paper on selection and diversity at the BPS Centenary Conference in 2001, which was reported in the national media. Christina Dykes, who was the Director of Candidates and Development at the Conservative Party, read about this and wrote to me asking

whether I would be able to help identify ways to increase the number of women and minority candidates being selected. The letter changed my whole research focus – I've spent the last 10 years studying politicians at local and national level, the work that they do, and the qualities they need to be effective. Most of this has also involved explaining and demonstrating what organisational psychologists can offer.

Politicians and government personnel don't naturally turn to psychologists –



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they simply don't know what we can offer. The real privilege has been to work with politicians from all parties, understand core needs and use psychological knowledge to design practical solutions. In doing so it has been possible to show that psychological approaches are useful. For example, I wrote a report for the Department of Communities and Local

Government about how local councillors can be supported in their roles, drawing on existing research and practice on learning and development and work design. We created development centres for senior politicians based on psychological principles of assessment, and I've spent the past four years running 360° feedback for politicians from all three main parties. This has allowed us to map the main development needs for politicians and develop an understanding of how political leadership differs from leadership in other contexts (Silvester & Dykes, 2008).

It's true that political parties rarely change their selection processes – but in the case of the Conservative Party, and later the Liberal Democrat Party, there was a perceived need and a desire to draw on best practice from other sectors. Political parties are slow to change – and working to adapt selection practices takes a long time because it is necessary to involve a whole range of stakeholders, including the Parliamentary party, the voluntary side, party agents, campaign teams, and prospective Parliamentary candidates. This is quite different from other types of organisations where decisions can be made by a small group of people. Organisational psychologists are experts at designing selection systems and understanding all types of work. Although very little attention has been paid to political 'jobs', there was no reason not to apply similar practices to political roles.

So do psychologists know what makes a good MP?

As far as I'm aware there are only a handful of organisational psychologists who are studying this, and we are really only beginning to develop the understanding that will allow us to answer this question fully. Compared with the many thousands of papers about business leadership, political leadership has been largely ignored. In fact there are only three published papers on individual differences and political performance.

Yet, implicit in the design of any selection process is the assumption that you are identifying those individuals with the best capability of performing the role. This means understanding both what the role entails (responsibilities and tasks) and what individual qualities are required to perform it well. When I first met with the Conservatives I remember asking what they were looking for – what was their vision of a good and poor MP? It quickly became clear that this was not something that had been addressed – in fact the question seems to be missing

from academic research too. As a result I went through a process of capturing shared beliefs about good and poor political performance by interviewing individuals from all stakeholder groups in order to create a competency framework and behavioural indicators that could be used as selection criteria. This also meant presenting the results plus findings from a review of the old system to a senior party committee. I then got the go-ahead to develop an assessment centre, which involved different exercises relating to the various aspects of the MP role, and to train MPs and members of the voluntary party to act as assessors.

I've recently gone through a similar process for the Liberal Democrat Party. This also involved creating a competency framework, so it was possible to look at the similarities and differences in shared beliefs about good and poor political performance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are a lot of overlaps across parties [see box]. It is after all the same role. But it is worth emphasising that for each of the six competencies there are a further five positive and five negative behavioural indicators that describe behaviour associated with good and poor performance as an MP. Although these indicators have not been published yet they do reveal subtle differences between political parties. For example, as the smaller of the three main political parties,

the Liberal Democrats need to attract more candidates who are able and motivated to develop seats in marginal constituencies. Both parties identified communication and intellectual skills as core aspects of the role and these were the two competencies that predicted electoral swing and percentage votes. However, the most important distinguishing factor between the political parties relate to values.

Values determine where individuals invest effort, and the challenge for any selection process is how to incorporate the assessment of values in addition to knowledge, skills or abilities. It's also interesting to note that a recent study we conducted with 200 politicians before the expenses scandal found that politicians share a view that integrity is the most important factor in political leadership (Silvester, Randall & Wyatt, in prep). This begs the question, why is integrity so difficult? Is it something to do with the politicians themselves, or the political system they find themselves in? Once again there are interesting parallels with what has been happening in the business world.

Do you think psychologists can help put the integrity and trust back into politics?

A better understanding of political work would certainly help. But the trust literature tells us that, in broad terms, we trust others if we perceive them to have our interests at heart and are competent to deliver. It would do no harm to build a greater awareness and understanding of what competence means in politics. In fact, Sharon Loivette has been conducting her PhD with me on politician behaviours associated with trust in local leadership, so we're gathering the evidence.

A related issue is the 'cult of personality'. Has it taken over politics, or is there still room for competencies and skills?

There's a natural tendency for the media to focus on perceived personality because this is a way of describing and labelling individuals. There's also a Darwinian culture in politics that assumes 'the best will succeed' – politicians will do well because of who they are and their innate qualities rather than the support or opportunities they are given. As such, little or no training is provided to MPs and learning takes place by observing others. We have an ESRC project at the moment that is looking at how politicians learn, and the role of mentoring. Clearly politicians require skills, but the reasons why politicians don't engage in training and development are fascinating in their own right. The key question is how do we support learning and development in a way that recognises the legitimacy of politicians as elected representatives.

I suppose it's more than just the perceived personality – so much of the pre-election banter seems to focus on the physical qualities of a politician,

Conservatives Competencies and Example Indicators	Liberal Democrat Competencies and Example Indicators
Communication Skills (e.g. Articulate and fluent when addressing an audience, able to think on feet)	Communication Skills (e.g. Communicates clearly, passionately and with conviction when using different forms of media)
Intellectual Skills (e.g. Quickly processes, understands and learns large amounts of information)	Strategic Thinking and Judgement (e.g. Understands the strategic relevance of information, and makes links between national- and local-level issues)
Relating to People (e.g. Approachable, inspires confidence and trust in others)	Representing People (e.g. Demonstrates tolerance in actively representing people of all backgrounds, ages, ethnicity and interests)
Leading and Motivating (e.g. Communicates a clear vision and persuades others to follow them)	Leadership (e.g. Builds trust, confidence and enthusiasm among supporters)
Resilience and Drive (e.g. Demonstrates stamina and persistence in overcoming resistance)	Resilience (e.g. Has the courage to make and defend unpopular decisions)
Conviction (e.g. Seeks opportunities to present views and persuades others to adopt their ideas)	Values in Action (e.g. Promotes beliefs and key messages through their own actions)

interview

such as looks, posture, voice, smile. Is this something psychology can illuminate and combat, or an inevitable factor in any selection process?

A fascination with physical appearance is probably inevitable in politics, and increasingly so given the growing use of media. But selection processes that focus on behavioural evidence from different exercises and ratings from independent assessors can minimise the impact of such factors. In reality, the focus is on whether an individual presents as competent. That said, one of the MP competencies, communication skills, includes indicators concerned with whether or not an individual presents as approachable and can deliver their message in a way that is convincing and persuasive. We know from psychological research that this can depend on factors such as an individual's looks, voice and smile. So it is difficult to draw a simple conclusion about this.

You've asked the politicians about the necessary skills – how close do you think their perceptions are to what political success really is?

In terms of actual evidence – we found a significant relationship between

Elected to office

'Although the 2010 general election will see many new MPs enter Parliament, they usually receive little support to help them make this transition. With the exception of a two-day induction programme run by the House, new MPs must navigate their way around by themselves and work out how things are done. In recent Parliaments, the first challenge has been to persuade a returning MP to share their desk until new roles and offices are allocated. New MPs must then set up offices in Parliament and in their constituency.

The transition into Parliament is not like the transition of employees into other business environments. A new Parliament means an entirely new organisation, with new people and responsibilities, and an environment characterised by ambiguity and change. Although MPs have a tremendous opportunity to shape their own roles, in the current political set-up they also have very little support and guidance to help them make the most of this independence. This is clearly something that needs to change if politicians are to become effective political leaders more quickly.'

Many politicians say that the election is the only appraisal they need

performance in the Conservative assessment centre and the electoral performance of those individuals selected as candidates to fight the 2005 general election (Silvester & Dykes, 2007). Critical thinking skills, and to a lesser extent communication skills, were both positively and significantly associated with percentage swing (the degree to which voting in a particular association moved towards the party) and percentage votes received. This is the first empirical evidence that individual differences impact on political performance. Of course electoral performance is only one small part of being an effective MP.

And do you think the competencies that the politicians identify as desirable match up with what the public really want?

This is a good question – I think it is vital that political parties have a vision of what they consider to be excellence in political leadership. But they also need to be transparent about this, because it enables the public to make more informed decisions. Of course members of the public may have very different perceptions of what is required – and there may be many conflicting views across different sectors of the public. Transparency means that debate and discussing can happen.

In all honesty, I think most people have very little idea of what politicians do – this was certainly true in my case before I began this work. I now realise that political roles are very complex and demanding. There is an urgent need to build wider public awareness

of what political roles really involve, and this means that politicians have to be more open about what they do.

Why do you think women are still underrepresented in politics? Are they as good as the men?

A key driver for developing the Conservative selection process was to address the underrepresentation of women and minorities. We focused on the approvals process (which determines whether an individual can become an approved prospective parliamentary candidate and is therefore eligible to apply to local associations), because the Conservative Party constitution makes it very difficult for the central party to have any influence over local party selection decisions. We also argued that as women perform as well as men when assessed using objective criteria and trained assessors, there was no reason why women should not be approved in equal numbers to men. In fact we tested this by comparing the performance ratings across exercises and competencies for men and women in the assessment centre and found absolutely no differences.

However, only 20 per cent of the applicants going through the assessment centre were women, which means that if men and women were performing equally, only 20 per cent of approved prospective parliamentary candidates would be women too. This illustrates the complex nature of factors that influence diversity. We have no evidence that women perform differently in politics, but there are clearly many different reasons why it is harder for women to gain entry to political roles and progress once in position. For example, even once selected

as a candidate becoming an MP can take many years of campaigning in a constituency whilst holding down another job, possibly in a different part of the country. Similarly, whilst men also have family responsibilities, women generally take on a disproportionately large share of these. This means that women are less likely to have the capacity to devote time and effort to campaigning. The idea of balancing the needs of a young family with three or four days working unsociable hours in Westminster and a further two to three days work in their constituency can also deter women from applying.

Funnily enough though, people still seem to abhor 'career politicians'. Robert Louis Stevenson once said: 'Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary.' So what role can psychology realistically play in actually developing the skills you have identified?

The idea of a 'career politician' conjures up an impression of someone with little experience outside politics, who is interested in climbing the 'greasy pole' of power for their own interests rather than the interests of others. Psychology can play an important role in unpacking and questioning some of the assumptions made about career politicians. For example, using modern definitions from career research it is clear that all politicians have careers (Arnold, 2009). It is therefore probably not the idea of career *per se* that is the problem. The two assumed characteristics of career politicians that people most dislike are that they put self needs before those of others and, because they only have experience of working in and around Westminster they don't understand what the real world is like, or the needs of different sections of society. There is certainly evidence that the number of MPs with a Westminster background is increasing, but little is known about whether they perform any less well in government or for their constituents.

I recently completed a review of the likely development needs of new MPs. One clear finding was that new MPs who have prior experience of Parliament will have a significant advantage over others, because they know how things work, where to go for support and, importantly, who the key power-brokers are. Therefore the existence of 'career politicians' does have implications for how political parties identify and utilise new political talent.

Is politics just another job, and

therefore one that occupational psychologists can easily study?

There are similarities with other types of work that allow us to draw comparisons. For example in the management literature there is growing recognition that business leaders require 'political' skills – influencing, networking, an understanding of power relations and mediation are all skills that politicians are expert at.

But there are also important differences. Politicians are democratically elected, this provides them with a democratic legitimacy that makes it very difficult to simply set objectives or tell them that they need to engage in certain types of work or development. In other types of organisations there is normally a hierarchy, where individuals perform certain tasks, and their performance is assessed by senior personnel according to whether it meets job and organisational objectives. Human resource functions are political systems because they exist to enforce the power of management to set and review performance objectives.

Politicians have no managers – they are elected to represent and take decisions on behalf of their constituents. We may not always like the decisions they make, but we respect their right to make them. This also means that there is no single performance measure. As politicians have to mediate between multiple conflicting views about what is right, there will always be different views about their performance. More importantly, however, there is a risk that introducing standard HR practices without recognising the political role they play could undermine the need for politicians to act independently and make unpopular decisions. This is why many politicians say that the election is the only appraisal they need.

That said, we're working on ways to provide information to politicians that can help them to develop and respond to public perceptions about how they are performing. One way is through anonymous feedback from different groups including political colleagues, officers and government officials and members of the public.

Isn't this all a bit depressing? Don't you think there's a risk that selection and feedback leads to homogenised, identikit politicians? Where does it leave the 'one off' characters like Michael Foot?

I don't think people realise that selection is already an important aspect of becoming a politician – at least outside the US, where it depends on how much

money individuals can raise to support their campaigns. In most Western countries political parties act as gatekeepers in identifying the individuals they consider have the ability and values necessary to be an MP for their party – but the public still have the right to choose between candidates from different parties. Joni Lovenduski has described party selection processes as the 'secret garden' of politics because before now little has been known about how decisions have been made and by whom. Increasing transparency helps parties become more accountable both to their own members and the public.

In your experience and bearing in mind your research, who have you considered 'the ultimate politician' and why?

I'm not sure I could identify an 'ultimate politician' – they are all so different, and it just goes to show that there are many different ways to be successful in politics. What I do know is that I've learned an immense amount from the politicians I've worked with, much of this has made me question why psychologists take so little account of the political nature of work. Ultimate politicians aren't afraid to recognise and deal with the demands of conflicted and complex environments, they inspire others to do better and strive for excellence themselves. What they do need to do better, however, is to build a far better public understanding of what politicians do, what realistically could be improved, and practical ways in which this might be achieved.

Are you a political being yourself? Will you be glued to Peter Snow's swingometer on the night?

I never was, but the more you get to know the individuals involved, the more interesting it becomes.

reading

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