

**WHAT IS A CAREER POLITICIAN?
THEORIES, CONCEPTS AND MEASURES**

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This paper examines the concept of “career politician.” It seeks to clarify, systematize, and measure this concept in order to facilitate testing theories and hypotheses associated with it. We argue that career politicians are a sub-set of professional politicians who lack significant occupational experience in the outside world and have other distinguishing attributes for which they are both praised and condemned. From compliments and condemnations put forward by political scientists, journalists, publics, and politicians, we extract three dimensions: Commitment, Lack of Experience, and Ambition. These dimensions and their indicators fit Wittgenstein’s family resemblance conceptual structure, which is how we analyze and measure them with data from a longitudinal study of British MPs spanning 1971-2016.

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Career politicians have become a prominent and dominant presence across the liberal democratic world (Best and Cotta 2000; Bochert and Zeiss 2003; Cairney 2007; Norris 1997; Saalfeld 1997). Driven by the widespread professionalization of national political life, the seeking and holding of elective office is now a full-time occupation almost everywhere. Britain, the primary focus of this paper, is a case in point. Following the watershed General Election of 1970, career politicians increasingly replaced amateurs and part-timers at Westminster (Riddell 1996, x-xi, 14). Today they predominate in overwhelming numbers (Allen 2018).

The rise of the career politician has been both welcomed and condemned: welcomed by political scientists who study parliamentary recruitment and institutionalization, condemned by most everyone else for alleged unintended consequences: diminishing competence in government, undermining descriptive representation, increasing careerism and weakening public service orientations, among others. Even Anthony King who, when coining the concept “career politician” in 1981, argued that consequences were mixed, concluded three decades later that the rise of the career politician “is almost certainly a bad thing” (King 2015, 295).

It hasn’t helped that the rise of the career politician coincided with the public’s increasing dislike for politicians as a class and decreasing trust in government (Allen and Birch 2015; Clarke et al 2018; Heath 2011; Riddell 1996). As the career politician concept made its way into common usage, it became an epithet wielded by journalists claiming “the electorate brims with disgust for career politicians” (Bruni 2015), for the “smooth, be-suited set of careerists,” (Freedland 2015) as well as an explanation for the popularity of anti-career politicians like Jeremy Corbyn, Nigel Farage, Bernie Sanders, Beppe Grillo, and Donald Trump – despite the fact that the first three have been in politics most of their adult lives.

Career politicians have been scrutinized most systematically by political scientist Anthony King (1981), and by political journalist Peter Riddell (1996), whose book endorsed

many of the main points in King's seminal contribution. Yet Riddell's commentary also significantly shifted the term's focus, as did polemical contributions by Peter Osborne (2007) and Jeremy Paxman (2002). Over time, the concept became multidimensional, which is not necessarily a problem. But it becomes problematic when different commentators deploy definitions that are inconsistent with others, inconsistent within themselves, or overlook other dimensions entirely.

This paper aims to clear up the underbrush. It also moves beyond thinking about career politicians in simple binary terms. The various attributes associated with career politicians are all continuous variables. Being a career politician is a matter of degree. We begin by reviewing familiar theoretical claims and usages in order to extract the concept's principal dimensions. We argue that the unconsolidated conceptual structure of "career politician" matches Wittgenstein's (1953) "family resemblance" concepts, which is how we measure it, using A unique interview and longitudinal career data set on MPs in the British House of Commons.

These MPs were interviewed in 1971-1974 and re-interviewed four decades later in 2012-2016. Because the 1970 General Election was the watershed when large numbers of career politicians entered Parliament, this sample still includes many amateurs and part-timers as well as career politicians, which facilitates comparing the two types. The 1971-1974 interviews were completed with 521 MPs, an 83 percent response rate. These face-to-face recorded and transcribed sessions lasted on average an hour and a half and ranged from a half hour 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 and ministerial roles and aspects of parliamentary careers and institutional practices, as well as character traits and other psychological characteristics considered critical in career performances. Respondents completed paper and pencil forms including a pre-parliamentary occupational history. The re-interviews in 2012-2016, again

face-to-face, recorded and transcribed, were completed with 116 of the 127 living and “interviewable” (some were too ill) original participants, a response rate of 90 percent. For the present paper, we coded and added to the data set further information from published sources on their pre-parliamentary occupations and the number of years they spent in them, their years of service in the Commons, and their retirements and the circumstances of their retirements.

Theories: Professionalization, Professional Politicians and Career Politicians

Most MPs today, and virtually all ministers, are career politicians. During the transformational 1970s, salaries increased, as did staff allowances and other resources like retirement and health benefits, resources sufficient to support full-time professional political careers (King 2000; Rush 2001; King 2015; Norton 1997, 23-25; Allen 2013; Cairney 2007).

Difficulties in identifying career politicians arise, in part, from the common practice of using the terms “career politician” and “professional politician” as synonyms. Professional politicians are distinguished from non-professionals by their full-time performance of political roles (Cairney 2007; King 1981, 277-78). But although all career politicians are professional politicians, not all professional politicians are career politicians (Squire 2007). Career politicians are a sub-set of professional politicians distinguished by additional attributes, particularly their lack of significant occupational experiences in the world outside politics. Desirable consequences attributed to the rise of career politicians are largely those associated with the full-time service that career politicians share with other professional politicians rather than with their additional distinctive characteristics.

To identify the principal dimensions of the concept “career politician,” we need to examine how the term is used in political science and political discourse, where it is packaged in normative arguments, both positive and negative. Our goal is to extract the concept’s

principal dimensions from these sources and reconstruct it systematically without losing touch with the political worlds in which it lives (Goertz 2006).

Positive Views: Recruitment and Institutionalization Studies

The pressures that produced professional politicians were driven by reform movements aimed at improving the capacity of legislatures to perform their functions of decision making, accountability and representation (King 2000). In the same vein, professionalization in new democracies like Poland and the Czech Republic was regarded as desirable because it facilitated political effectiveness and consolidation (Shabad and Slomczynski 2002). Among political scientists who study parliamentary recruitment and institutionalization, professionalization and professional politicians are valued for their contributions to good governance.

There is little doubt that professional politicians at Westminster have contributed much to good governance in Britain. The House of Commons undoubtedly upped its performance in various respects when professionals gradually replaced amateurs on the backbenches. Professional MPs who focus their work on constituency service pay more attention to citizens' needs and views (Riddell 1996, 24, 2011, 83; Squire 2007). They have more contact with their constituents and work harder than did most of their predecessors (King 1981, 280).

Professional MPs who focus on policy advocacy and scrutinizing the executive work harder as well. They are likely to be active members of select committees, which vigorously pursue accountability by investigating the work of government departments (Norton, 1997, 22-23, 27; Searing 1994; Saalfeld 1997, 44; King 1981, 280; Riddell, 2011, 83). They are also said to be more assertive and independent than were their predecessors.

In the same vein, professional politicians are more likely than their predecessors to be politically experienced, to bring to Parliament knowledge and skills they have learned as local

councilors, political researchers or party workers (Allen, 2013, 2018; Riddell, 1996, 306-07; Crewe, 2015, 114-115). These desirable characteristics include: understanding arcane rules and procedures in the legislative process (Squire 2007); a disposition toward compromise (Riddell 1996, 270-71); and the capacity to generate and digest information and presumably to make better political judgments (Squire 2007). Such are the virtues that professional politicians, including career politicians, are said to share. But career politicians are also said to have other rather less desirable attributes.

Negative Views: Journalists, Publics, and Politicians Themselves

The first critique of career politicians is that their middle class homogeneity excludes people and perspectives from more diverse backgrounds (Allen 2013, 2018; King 2015). Thus, upper-class and working-class MPs have been replaced by middle-class, private-sector business people on the Conservative side, and by middle-class, public-sector people on the Labour benches. The assumption behind this critique is that when MPs cover, in the aggregate, a wider range of perspectives, they better represent the public's outlooks (King 2015, 279; Norris 1997; Dalyell 1997; Abbott 2014; Heath 2015). Moreover, the disappearance of diversity weakens Parliament's collective knowledge about the wider world and impairs ministers' and backbenchers' political judgments.

In a similar vein, the increased demands of parliamentary and ministerial work leave little opportunity to pursue part-time careers outside the House beyond consultancies and non-executive directorships. If politicians are to absorb significant life and occupational experiences outside politics, they must do so before they enter Parliament (King 2015, 71-72). Today's career politicians do not do so because they enter politics earlier than did their predecessors, and the range of occupations from which they come has narrowed a great deal. Their predecessors had been prominent industrialists, stockbrokers, landlords, successful

barristers, leaders in other professions, manual workers, and trade union officials. By contrast, career politicians are more likely to come from political apprenticeships and associated occupations like public relations, journalism and media, teachers and lecturers. They have little contextual understanding of the lives many citizens lead (Allen 2018). They also have little if any specialized knowledge of policy areas and subjects (Osborne 2007, 208; Kettle 2015; King and Crewe 2014).

“Everybody who enters the House of Commons today is consumed by ambition for office and influence, and quite often for publicity and fame you know,” said a re-interviewed cabinet minister discussing career politicians. Compared to non-career politicians, who tend to be relaxed about politics, career politicians are said to be more concerned with personal advancement than with the substance of issues (King 1981, 279, 283-84; Radice, Vallance and Willis 1990, 20-21; Riddell 1996, 278; Osborne 2007). Such characterizations were common among our re-interviewed MPs when reflecting on changes at Westminster. They distinguished between “Ambition to Do” and “Ambition to Be,” and were quite harsh in charging that career politicians’ intense desire for office was too often unconnected to public service orientations.

Classic career politicians enter politics in their 20s or early 30s with obsessive and narrow perspectives that are unsuitable for mature political leadership (Riddell 1996, 53). Recent prototypes are the special advisors or “spads” who see politics as a career move rather than a vocation. They are great at networking, but are said to lack maturity and vision (Abbott 2015). They advance directly from being a political activist at university to become an MP’s researcher, a think-tank staffer, or an assistant to an MP, and, soon after being elected, move quickly to the frontbench. If they do not move up fast enough, or, having been there, calculate they will not be there again soon, they may leave politics to climb career ladders in other fields as did former Prime Minister David Cameron and former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne.

Drawing upon these positive and negative claims, and applying principles of concept formation articulated by Goertz (2006), we identify the career politician's principal attributes and measure them with our data on British MPs.

From Politics as a Vocation to Impatient Spads: Three Fundamental Dimensions of Career Politicians

We will treat the concept ontologically, (Goertz 2006, 27-28) that is to say, as a concept with component dimensions each of which must be justified by empirical and normative claims about its importance, and each of which must be associated with causal claims about its political consequences, in this case consequences for desirable political leadership and governance.

In the positive and negative claims we have reviewed above, three attributes or dimensions stand out: Strong Commitment, Lack of Experience in the Wider World, and Strong Ambition. Many of us feel that we know a career politician when we see one. Yet different commentators have treated different dimensions as the essential markers for identifying career politicians while de-emphasizing or overlooking others; and some of these dimensions are inconsistent with others while each suffers unappreciated exceptions.

Consequently, like many normatively charged concepts in political science, the edges are blurred, and which politicians are in or out of the box is not as clear as we think. This creates multiple problems for measurement, which we will consider when examining and operationalizing the dimensions. Moreover, although everyday political talk about career politicians typically uses binary classifications - either X is a career politician or a non-career politician - Anthony King (1981) and Peter Riddell (1996) treat it as a matter of degree. And that is how we measure it here.

Concept Structure

Goertz (2006, 6-7, 60) has helped to organize our thinking about concepts like “career politician” with his multi-level framework. The “Basic Level”, the first column in Figure 1 below, is the concept itself – career politician – which people use in making theoretical and normative claims about its consequences. The “Secondary Level”, the second column, identifies the fundamental dimensions that constitute the concept: Strong Commitment, Lack of Experience, and Strong Ambition. The third level, the “Indicator Level” in Figure 1’s third column, lists each dimension’s operationalizations. The basic and secondary conceptual levels are sufficiently abstract to fit different institutional contexts and can thereby enable theory building in comparative analyses. The indicator level opens the door to accommodating empirical diversity in different times and places (Goertz 2006, 64).

Figure 1 – Career Politician Concept

BASIC LEVEL (CONCEPT)	SECONDARY LEVEL (DIMENSIONS)	INDICATOR LEVEL (MEASURES)
CAREER POLITICIAN	STRONG COMMITMENT	Many Years in the House of Commons
		Full time Job as Member of the House of Commons
		No Voluntary Retirement from the House of Commons
	LACK OF EXPERIENCE	Type of Occupation in pre-Parliamentary Career
		Young Age at Entry in the House of Commons
	STRONG AMBITION	Self-reported Strength of Desire for Further Position
Probability of Achieving Further Position		

Strong Commitment

During the interviews conducted in 2012-16, we asked a now retired former minister: “What does the phrase “Career Politician” mean to you?” In his mind it was clear and simple: “It means someone who thinks politics is their life.” When Anthony King coined the term in 1981 that is exactly what he meant too. Following Max Weber (1948), King declared that commitment to a political career is the key, and degree of commitment the litmus test. Weber distinguished those who lived for politics from those who lived off politics, but career politicians today both have a strong vocational commitment to politics *and* very likely live off politics as a major source of their income (Rush 2001, 109-110).

All that is absolutely necessary, according to King, is that politics be their occupation and preoccupation, their calling, their vocation. Commitment is the principal defining attribute before all others (King 1981, 250-55; Riddell 1996, 7; Osborne 2007, 326). These people seek fulfillment in politics. They love the political life. They relish it. They are charmed by it, fascinated by it, entranced by it. They are committed to politics as a full time, lifetime occupation (Riddell 1996, 2-7). This is what career politicians share with other professional politicians. They work very hard and for very long hours. They see their future in politics. They are definitely not interested in voluntary retirements to pursue other careers (King 1981, 250-55).

In Table 1 below, we present measures of each of these three aspects of Strong Commitment: Duration, Intensity, and Revocability. Since nearly all of our 1971-1974 MPs were either deceased, retired, or on the cusp of retirement when we ended our data collection in 2016, it is possible to use behavioral indicators across their careers to assess their degrees of commitment.

The first aspect of commitment, Duration of Commitment, is measured by the total number of years each MP served in the House of Commons. As can be seen in Table 1, there

is a wide range for length of tenure: Nine percent of our MPs left in ten or fewer years, and nearly one out of four did not stay beyond fifteen, not nearly enough to consider it a lifetime's vocation. This might require twenty-five years or more: one could enter around age forty and retire in one's late sixties or later still. Forty-two percent of these MPs did just that. Of course some MPs enter the House much later than others and will not have had time for a full-blown Commons career. This does not strike us as a difficulty however, because whatever their reasons, they will not have served long enough to have experienced a Commons vocation. Years served is a rough measure, but it is one important aspect of a politics as a vocation.

Intensity of Commitment, the second aspect, is measured by total time spent on parliamentary activities inside and outside Westminster. This information was obtained on a form filled in by the 1971-1974 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 (compared to backbenchers, they spend less time in the House).

These numbers may be somewhat exaggerated, although in pre-tests, MPs denied it. When lawyers in the UK calculate hours spent on a case, some include time thinking about it at dinner, in the bath, and even in the loo. Some MPs may have done the same, and actually there may be something to it as a measure of vocational commitment. In any event, we see a considerable range here again: the modal estimate for total time engaged with the career in a typical week was between 51 and 60 hours. Nine percent reported forty or less, as in a 9-5 non-vocational job, while nearly half put their estimate at 60 hours or more, which is something like what academics who see their own careers as vocations might claim.

Revocability of Commitment is measured by two questions in the 1971-1974 interviews: “How likely is it that you might voluntarily retire from Parliament?”, and, “What would be the reasons for this?” This measure, based on their recorded responses to both questions, assesses their intentions at the time of the original interviews. We want to know whether alternative careers might have been in their minds, at least as possibilities. Consistent with King’s (1981) and Riddell’s (1996) observations that, after the 1970s, most MPs were not “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow” politicians, we find that sixty two percent of these respondents were not planning voluntary retirements.

We also coded a behavioral measure of what these MPs actually did over the ensuing decades.¹ In the end, four out of five stayed the course, which is not surprising because after several decades in the House quite a few realize they no longer have transferable skills for alternative careers (Roberts 2017). Although we suspect a good deal of measurement error in this behavioral indicator, it nevertheless has a significant correlation (.05 level) with their 1971-74 responses to the intentions questions.

¹ King (1981, 267) deemed those who retired early enough to pursue an alternative career as less than deeply committed to the political one, while those who retired after age 60 were deemed not to have had a burning desire to pursue alternative careers. It is a bit more complicated than that though. 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*,” the type of commitment that 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 1 – The 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	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
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>521</i>

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
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>326</i>

Revocability		
Voluntary Retirement	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
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>490</i>

Lack of Experience in the Wider World

Pre-Parliamentary Occupations. If King (1981) thought commitment was the most important attribute of a career politician, political journalist Peter Riddell (1996, 263, 1-7) made “lack of experience” the defining characteristic. He gave commitment its due, but gave lack of experience center stage. Riddell’s book chimed with a number of contemporary articles (Rush 1994). Since then, lack of experience has come to be the career politician’s attribute that draws most attention in journalistic and political discourse, not least because the proportion of MPs with political or public relations backgrounds has grown (Rush 1994).

As an independent variable, this dimension conveys censorious charges against career politicians. The argument is that, compared to non-career politicians, they have not had significant work experiences in other occupations, in “proper jobs,” which is said to undermine their ability to evaluate government proposals and practice accountability. And their lack of significant managerial experience in commerce or industry impoverishes their political judgments in ministerial office. As an example, Osborne (2007, 6-7) offers Alan Milburn, a cabinet minister in the Blair government, who was put in charge of the National Health Service, one of the largest employers in the world, despite the fact that his only non-political work experience was a brief period managing a Marxist bookshop.

In the 1971-1974 interviews, MPs were asked to review and correct an occupational history form on which were listed (from published sources) their pre-parliamentary occupations, including the years they worked in these occupations. This form was introduced near the end of a long interview, and some respondents, understandably, did not give it the attention we would have liked, while most made extensive corrections to the information. To code pre-parliamentary occupations, we began with these corrected forms and worked with contemporary published sources to sort out, where necessary, the predominant occupations they pursued after having completed their education. These data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – The Lack of Experience Dimension: First Indicator: Pre-Parliamentary Career

Predominant Occupation	Percentage	Frequency
<i>Political occupations</i>		
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
<i>Total</i>	4.8	25
<i>Semi-political occupations</i>		
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
<i>Total</i>	42.3	220
<i>Non-political occupations</i>		
12 – Corporation (Director/Executive)	3.6	19
13 – Small business (Proprietor/Manager)	13.0	68
14 – Non-executive company director	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
<i>Total</i>	52.2	274
88 – None	0.2	1
<i>Total</i>	100.0	521

In Table 2 we have listed MPs' predominant pre-parliamentary occupations and the number of MPs who pursued each. Following Cairney's (2007) classifications, which may have been constructed with some of King's and Riddell's suggestions in mind, these occupations are divided into three groups: Political ("Instrumental"), Semi-Political ("Brokerage") and Non-Political ("Proper Jobs") Occupations. Political Occupations are those directly related to politics. They are political, pre-parliamentary occupations like assistant to an MP, or a lobbyist, or a political researcher at party offices. Semi-Political Occupations are not directly political, but they are occupations whose practitioners are likely to be in touch with political worlds or at least to follow regularly developments in them. These include occupations like trade union official, public relations, journalism, barrister. Non-Political Occupations include a wide variety of "real life" occupations from corporate executives and small business proprietors to accountants, engineers, clerical and manual workers, and farmers.

We want to assess what was likely learned in different types of occupations, i.e., the knowledge or lack of knowledge that new MPs might have brought to Parliament. The dimension here is lack of experience in the wider world. Career politicians who have only pursued Political Occupations clearly fit this criterion, albeit in Table 2 we find they are only 4.8 percent of the sample. When King (1981, 261) and Riddell (1996, xi, 10) introduced and developed the concept of career politician, however, they were not thinking solely of these few. In fact the occupations they named were these plus all those in the Semi-Political category – a total of 47 percent. Finally, MPs with Non-Political backgrounds would presumably count as everyone's non-career politicians.

Of those whose pre-parliamentary occupations were Political, two-thirds spent ten years or less pursuing them. This is also true of 45 percent of people from the Semi-Political occupations. But 44 percent of those who held Non-Political jobs in the world outside prior to

entering Parliament, spent eleven to twenty years in them, and 29 percent spent twenty-one to forty, more than enough time to “experience the wider world.”

Age at Entry to House of Commons. There have always been career politicians who were hooked on politics in their teens and crystallized their career aspirations in university debating societies and political clubs where they met leading politicians of the day (Riddell 1996, 9, 29-53; Osborne 2005). Many of them, however, did not enter politics till their late 30s and 40s, having done something else significant beforehand. Classic career politicians, by contrast, enter the political world earlier, perhaps with expectations to rise quickly to ministerial or opposition frontbench positions. Before their predecessors became party leaders they at least had ten to twenty years of significant experiential learning on the backbenches, albeit not in the world outside (Cowley 2012). Before the watershed 1970s, the few career politicians who entered the House during their 20s were more likely to be there from family tradition than from ambitious career commitments (King 1981, 262). The growth in the number of career-oriented young entrants has drawn concerns that governments are being run by young adults who lack personal maturity and are prone to political blunders. Aristotle believed that the maturity needed by political leaders often did not come till their fifties.

Table 3 – The Lack of Experience Dimension: Second Indicator: Age at Entry in 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
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>521</i>

It is difficult to measure personal maturity directly, but we can measure age at first entry to the House of Commons as in Table 3 above. Only 10 percent of the respondents in our 1971-1974 sample entered the House when they were 30 years of age or younger. These 50 members include a few landed gentry and aristocrats who were not career politicians, but as the number of early entrants has grown over the decades, these “Genuine Toffs” have disappeared and the number of genuine career politicians has increased (Riddell 2011, 167). If we take age 35 rather than 30 as the cut off entry age for an archetype career politician, even in our 1971-1974 data their numbers rise to 32 percent. Lack of personal maturity, or potential lack of personal maturity, which is all that we can measure, does not result from the condition of early entry alone. When critics sneer at the callow youths they think they see, they are usually linking personal with political maturity, early age at entry (and rise) with lack of “real life” experiences in occupations beyond the political world. These two indicators of lack of experience overlap and will be used together to help identify who is a classic career politician and who is not.

Strong Ambition

If King’s conception of career politicians emphasized their commitment and Riddell’s their lack of experience, political scientist Michael Rush’s (2001, 135-37) account of them emphasized ambition, especially excessive ambition, a complaint echoed in many countries (King 2000). Career politicians stand out by the strength of their desires for power and status (King 1981, 282; Osborne 2007, 33). They place much higher value than did many of their predecessors on attaining and maintaining ministerial office and on keeping their seats in parliament (Riddell 1996, 28). This single-minded drive not only to attain office but also to keep it, travels well cross-nationally because most career politicians share a disturbing vulnerability: If they lose their seats when they are in middle age, they will have few other

skills with which to pursue alternative careers that offer comparable status or even income (McAllister 1997, 20; Wessels 1997, 76-77).

Because career politicians are so consumed by ambition, they focus too much on the game of politics and neglect other important matters. For them, it is all about making a mark in order to advance or protect their careers. In their rush to make a mark, they want laws enacted, and enacted quickly. Hence, they innovate when no innovation is needed. Hence, they want immediate results, take short-term perspectives, and neglect underlying problems. They announce unrealistic goals to win attention – and disillusion the public when these unrealistic goals are unrealized. The parliamentary timetable becomes overcrowded and insufficient attention is given to details of government proposals. Legislation becomes poorly drafted, internally inconsistent, and full of unintended consequences (King 2015, 250-52, 182-83, 281; Osborne 2007, 309). They have poor public service orientations, for their ambitions lead them to “see politics as a career move rather than a call to public service” (Blears 2008) and to make policy decisions in terms of how their careers will be affected (Riddell 1996; Osborne 2007, 64).

Table 4: The Ambition Dimension

Strength of desire for further position	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
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>489</i>

Likelihood of achieving further position	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
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>424</i>

To investigate political ambition, King (1981) turned to autobiographies and memoirs because he could not find interview data on desires for office. Such data are available, however, from transcribed answers to two questions in the 1971-1974 interviews. These data are reported in Table 4. 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-attributable interviews with written guarantees, conducted at time when, even without written guarantees, non-attribution was taken seriously. Some respondents were coy, and some a bit vague, but most seemed to answer frankly.

Strength of Desire for Further Positions. In response to the first question, nearly all those desiring further positions specified posts ranging from whips to junior ministers to ministers and cabinet ministers, though a few named committee chairmanships. These discussions were coded from “Absolutely not” to “Very strong” for careerists, i.e., career politicians who said they would leave the House if a further position was not forthcoming. Those whose self-reported ambitions ran from “No” to “Weak” were further coded for reasons behind their static ambition: involuntary (age, expects to lose seat, leader would never appoint me) and voluntary as well (other stronger commitments - family, business, constituents, etc).

Both discussions 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, and our career politicians are certainly among them.

Likelihood of Achieving Further Position. While we do not have a good measure of excessive ambition, responses to the second question might stand as a proxy for it: Those who believe their chances of achieving further positions are very good or even fairly good (18 percent) are likely more determined and keen than are those who want further positions but who characterize their chances of getting them as uncertain, very small or none (33 percent). At the very least, responses to this second question can help weed out those who are serious from those who are not.

From the theoretical mists of everyday political talk about career politicians, we have now extracted three fundamental dimensions: Strong Commitment, Lack of Experience, and Strong Ambition, and seven indicators of these dimensions. Now we need to consider how to handle them.

Classic and Family Resemblance Structures

The classic and most common approach to defining concepts requires necessary and sufficient conditions (Goertz 2006). Each of the concept's specified 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 actually meet these stringent criteria. But "career politician" is a worse fit than most. The concept has been stretched to cover an ever-wider variety of cases (Sartori 1970) and, in so doing, the focus has shifted from one definitional dimension to another. For King (1981) it was commitment, for Riddell (1996) lack of experience, for Rush (2001) excessive ambition.

Most commentators would not reject any of the three dimensions, even if it were not in the forefront of their minds. And to be fair, King and Riddell, who analyzed the concept most deeply, mentioned all of them. But in focusing on MPs who were exemplars of the type, they, like everyone else, focused on one or two dimensions at the expense of others. Still, the consequence of decades of thinking with exemplars, and drifting into conceptual stretching, is that none of the concept's three fundamental dimensions is absolutely necessary to identify a career politician, which violates the key requirement for classic concept definitions. Each dimension has notable exceptions: people who don't fit its criterion but who many observers would nonetheless recognize as career politicians because they make the grade on one or more of the other dimensions. Let us consider some examples.

Dimension 1 – Strong Commitment: Journalists and politicians regard the proliferating young “spads” as career politicians, but many spads seem to lack a vocational commitment to the career. If they do not achieve high positions early on, they are prepared to make their marks by climbing other career ladders. They may not have the commitment, but they look to us like career politicians because they do lack experience in the wider world and personal maturity (Dimension 2), and they do have very strong ambition for office (Dimension 3).

Dimension 2 – Lack of Experience in the Wider World: Most observers of British politics could, if pressed, name dozens of politicians like Cecil Parkinson and Norman Tebbit who entered Parliament between the ages of 39 and 45 and were widely regarded as career politicians, but did not satisfy Dimension 2 because they certainly did not lack occupational experience in the wider world. Parkinson was a certified public accountant and Tebbit a transatlantic airline pilot. But they did fit very well the profiles for commitment (Dimension 1) and for very strong ambition (Dimension 3).

Dimension 3 – Strong Ambition: Anthony King, Peter Riddell and others consider the professional constituency members and policy advocates who have replaced amateurs in these

roles, and who work long and hard at their duties, as career politicians, but many of them do not have strong ambition for ministerial office (Dimension 3). Nonetheless, King and Riddell count them as career politicians because they clearly display very robust commitments to the career (Dimension 1).

In sum, common conceptualizations of “career politicians,” do not fit the requirements of classic concepts: not one of their three fundamental dimensions seems absolutely necessary to the definition. How then are we going to measure the concept and identify career politicians systematically without doing violence to its usage in the political contexts where it is at home?

There may be “more or less consensus” on recognizing career politicians when we see them, but in comparing the classificatory criteria that different observers are using, it is difficult to see where this “more or less consensus” comes from. We suggest it comes from intuitive applications of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance” procedures to the concept of career politician.

Career Politician: A Family Resemblance Concept

The key difference between necessary and sufficient conditions and family resemblance concepts is *substitutability*, that is to say: (a) necessary conditions do not have substitutes, but (b) in family resemblance concepts the absence of some conditions can be compensated for by the presence of others (Goertz 2006, 45). The family resemblance conceptual structure is less demanding than the classic approach because, as Wittgenstein argued, concepts that fit this structure have no necessary components or dimensions. All that is required in using family resemblance dimensions to sort cases 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, we may focus on single attributes or on different combinations of attributes – as we 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 characteristics 1, 2, and 3. 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, and 3. In other words, neither characteristic 1, 2, nor 3 is absolutely necessary to establish membership in family Q, because different sub-sets of these characteristics may be sufficient (Goertz 2006).

It is important to recognize, however, that the strength of the family resemblance structure can also be its weakness. For us, the strength is that this structure keeps the career politician concept close to its usage in political life, which helps maintain its normative charge and facilitates explanation. The weakness is that it may leave investigators with a heterogeneous measure that makes prediction difficult.

Re-Constructing the Concept from the Dimensions

The key to using the dimensions is that (a) Most commentators would likely recognize all three dimensions as relevant, even if they focus on only one or two, and (b) Even though many commentators treat the classification as a binary choice, we are in fact dealing with a continuous variable, which King (1981) explicitly recognized. Being a career politician is a matter of degree. Therefore we have integrated all three dimensions into a single index summarized in on-line Appendix Table 1. By using more information than most commentators do, we systematize their collective informal thinking and improve the validity of our measures

Looking first at Commitment, regarding the first component, *Duration of Commitment* (Length of service), we give full marks – 3 points - to MPs who have had a full career in the Commons, which we set at more than 20 years. A short career, earning only 1 point, is set at 1-10 years, while moderate duration (11-20 years) earns 2. Full career politician marks for

Intensity of Commitment (Total time spent in a typical week on parliamentary activities inside and outside parliament) – again 3 points – go to MPs who put in more than 60 hours per week. We assign only 1 point to the MPs who spend less than 40 hours, which we define as part-time, and 2 points to those working between 41 and 59 hours. *Revocability of Commitment* (Voluntary Retirement) adds between 0.5 points for MPs who say they are likely to voluntarily retire early, and 3 points for those who say they would never do so.

The dimension Lack of Experience has two components. For the first, *Type of Pre-Parliamentary Occupation*, 3 points go to Political Occupations, which are directly related to politics, 2 to Semi-Political Occupations, which are indirectly related, and 1 point to Non-Political Occupations. With regard to *Age at Entry to the House of Commons*, 3 points are awarded to MPs who entered when they were 35 or younger, 2 points to those entering between the ages of 36 and 45, and 1 point to those first elected when they were 45 or older.

For Ambition, *Strength of Desire for Further Position* ranges from 0 for MPs who replied “Absolutely not!” to 3 for MPs with a very strong desire. Regarding the second indicator, *Likelihood of Achieving Further Position*, those who described their chances as fairly good or very good earned the top career politician score of 3; those who were uncertain or moderately optimistic obtained 2 points; and those who saw no chance or said their chances were very small, scored only 1.

Weighting the Dimensions

How should measures of the dimensions be combined to create the summary indices? Unlike classic necessary and sufficient conceptual structures, which assign equal weights to a concept’s dimensions, family resemblance structures accommodate situations where some dimensions are more important than others. Their comparative importance is determined by theoretical and normative considerations (Goertz 2006, 47-50).

As can be seen in On-Line Appendix Table 2, the range of scores differs across the three dimensions as a consequence of how we have measured them: Strong Commitment 2.5 – 9 points, Lack of Experience 2 – 6 points, and Strong Ambition 0 – 6 points. We have used these scores to create an un-weighted index that ranges from 4.5 – 21. But the contribution of each dimension to the index is unequal and arbitrary. Their respective contributions need to be adjusted to reflect their relative importance according to theoretical and normative considerations. Thus, a weighted index makes more theoretical sense. Still, we report both the un-weighted and weighted indices in On-Line Appendix Tables 3 and 4. Both will be validated below.

In the professional discussions and political polemics through which the concept has evolved, Lack of Experience stands out as the most pervasive and fundamental dimension. It wasn't in the beginning when, following Max Weber's ideas about politics as a vocation, King identified Strong Commitment as the concept's core. It has been a central dimension ever since. Commitment's maximum score is 9 points, and we will leave it at that. But as the concept of career politician moved into more general and public usage, and as the profiles of MPs began to change, Lack of Experience took center stage. It captured the chief theoretical claims about consequences of the rise of career politicians, and the main normative case against this type of professional MP. For the weighted index, we therefore assign Lack of Experience the largest score by doubling its score, so that this dimension now ranges from 4 points to 12. Strong Ambition has always been part of the whole package, but not the dominant part, because although it can be intense, and intensely disliked, most commentators accept that there have always been career politicians who do not have strong desires for higher office. We will therefore leave its contribution at 6 points. The weighted summary index ranges from 6.5 - 27.

Validation: Ministers/Backbenchers and Riddell/King

Having constructed our career politician indices, we now probe their validity by investigating empirically how well they actually measure the concept of career politician. We report three validation tests on which our indices perform very well – both the overall index scores (weighted and un-weighted versions) and the separate scores for each dimension.

As a first validation of our career politician indices, we compare scores for ministers and backbenchers. If the indices are working as expected, scores for ministers should be consistently higher, because ministers are more likely to be career politicians than are backbenchers. But perhaps not that much higher, because ministers in this test include everyone who has ever served as a minister, which includes some junior ministers who understood they were placemen rather than high flyers, and former ministers from pre-1970 governments where, the further back we go, the more we find ministers who were only half-hearted career politicians, or not career politicians at all. According to King (2015, 62-63), until the 1970s one half to one third of ministerial positions even in cabinets were held by people who were not classic career politicians. They had more limited commitments and more limited ambitions. These considerations make the minister/backbencher comparison a high bar to scale for our career politician indices. Hence, the results in Table 5 are very impressive indeed.

Table 5 – Validation Test 1: Career Politician Index for Ministers and Backbenchers (Mean Score and Standard Deviation in parenthesis)

	Backbenchers (N = 408)	Ministers (N = 113)
<i>Overall Index</i>		
Career Politician: Weighted (6.5-27)	16.28 (3.61)	20.19 (2.76)
Career Politician: Unweighted (4.5-21)	12.74 (2.96)	15.91 (2.20)
<i>Index Dimensions</i>		
Commitment (2.5-9)	6.80 (1.33)	7.22 (1.30)
Lack of Experience (2-6)	3.49 (0.98)	4.17 (0.86)
Ambition (0-6)	2.34 (1.92)	4.06 (1.76)

For both ministers and backbenchers, we calculate the average score for the weighted and un-weighted composite career politician indices, and also the separate score for each dimension (Commitment, Lack of Experience, and Ambition). In each paired comparison reported in Table 5, the larger the number, the stronger the career politician trait. As these data show, ministers consistently exhibit higher numbers for the two composite career politician indices and for each measure of the separate three dimensions.

The composite indices produce the most pronounced differences between ministers and backbenchers, with the weighted composite index generating the largest gap. Among the three separate indices, the ambition score stands out, perhaps not surprisingly since, again, ministers are more likely to have desired higher office than did their colleagues who remained on the backbenches. Overall, ministers consistently exhibit stronger average scores on the career politician trait than do backbenchers. We conducted T-Test calculations for all the comparisons

to evaluate whether the averages for ministers are statistically significantly different from the averages for backbenchers. The calculations show that all the compared scores, i.e., both the overall scores and the scores for each dimension, are significantly different at the conventional .05 level.

Our second and third validation tests focus on the MPs who were identified as career politicians by Riddell (1996; 2011) and King (1981; 2015), the principal journalistic and academic commentator on the subject. The mean index scores for these named career politicians are compared in Tables 6 and 7 to the MPs in our sample who were not identified as career politicians in Riddell’s or King’s publications. This is again a demanding validation test for our indices because, in this case, there are certainly many career politicians in our sample who were not named by Riddell or King and who therefore will be found among the “Non-Listed Politicians” (i.e., non-career politicians) in the Tables.

Table 6 – Validation Test 2: Career Politician Index Score based on Riddell’s List (Mean Score and Standard Deviation in parenthesis)

	Non-Listed Politicians (N = 470)	Listed Career Politicians (N = 51)
<i>Overall Index</i>		
Career Politician: Weighted (6.5-27)	16.48 (3.69)	20.44 (2.32)
Career Politician: Unweighted (4.5-21)	12.91 (3.03)	16.04 (1.91)
<i>Index Dimensions</i>		
Commitment (2.5-9)	6.83 (1.33)	7.31 (1.22)
Lack of Experience (2-6)	3.55 (0.98)	4.41 (0.75)
Ambition (0-6)	2.50 (1.98)	4.32 (1.51)

Table 7 – Validation Test 3: Career Politician Index Score based on King’s List (Mean Score and Standard Deviation in parenthesis)

	Non-Listed Politicians (N = 475)	Listed Career Politicians (N = 46)
<i>Overall Index</i>		
Career Politician: Weighted (6.5-27)	16.63 (3.68)	20.59 (3.19)
Career Politician: Unweighted (4.5-21)	13.03 (3.03)	16.18 (2.30)
<i>Index Dimensions</i>		
Commitment (2.5-9)	6.84 (1.33)	7.38 (1.22)
Lack of Experience (2-6)	3.57 (0.98)	4.37 (0.88)
Ambition (0-6)	2.59 (1.98)	3.79 (2.13)

In Tables 6 and 7 it is again the composite indices that produce the largest gaps between the two groups of politicians, with the weighted index doing better than the un-weighted. In both cases, the Ambition dimension stands out as the most discriminating. Furthermore, T-Test calculations find all the comparisons significant at the .05 level. In sum, therefore, both validation tests again support the conclusion that our three dimensions and the overall indices are measuring well the degree to which MPs in our sample fit the model of career politicians.

Conclusion

Career politicians are a sub-set of professional politicians. They are known by their lack of experience, and by other distinctive attributes for which they are both praised and condemned in informal theories and normative concerns. From these compliments and condemnations, we

extracted three fundamental dimensions of the concept: Strong Commitment, Lack of Experience, and Strong Ambition.

The concept of the career politician has rarely been investigated empirically despite its pervasiveness in political debates and its hypothesized negative consequences. We have clarified its structure and measured its dimensions in order to facilitate investigating the informal theories and hypotheses associated with it. We have treated it as a multi-level and multidimensional concept that fits Wittgenstein's family resemblance structure. The key to its symmetry with this structure is the fact that none of its three dimensions is absolutely necessary to determine the degree to which an MP is a career politician. Different sub-sets of the three dimensions can be used to do this, and have been used effectively by different observers.

From our data set of 1971-1974 interviews, supplemented with information on pre-parliamentary careers and on subsequent parliamentary career patterns, we developed indicators to measure each of the concept's three dimensions. We weighted these indicators according to the weight attributed to them in everyday political discourse. They have passed difficult validation tests: distinguishing between ministers and backbenchers and distinguishing between career politicians named by the concept's principal analysts and the other MPs in our sample. The weighted composite index performed best, but the un-weighted index and each of the three separate indices also produced the predicted higher mean scores for ministers than for their colleagues on the backbenches and likewise for named career politicians compared to the rest.

The defined basic concept and its three dimensions are sufficiently abstract to enable theory building in comparative analysis and empirical investigations of the attitudes and behaviors attributed to career politicians. The indicator level (see Figure 1 above) is open to empirical diversity in different times and places. That said, we have identified four behavioral measures based on biographical sources that might be readily used in cross-national research:

for Strong Commitment, duration and revocability and for Lack of Experience, types of pre-parliamentary occupation and age at entry.

Headlines like these: “Can We Stop the Rise of the Career Politician?” (Dayell 2014) and “Do We Need Career Politicians?” (BBC News 2012) express fears that the progressive proliferation of career politicians is inevitable. Many recruitment studies make similar assumptions (Cairney 2007; Best and Cotta 2000; Cairney 2007; Norris 1997; Saalfeld 1997; Cairney 2007). So do some of our retired MPs who are nostalgic for a lost golden age: “There are far more career politicians than there were in my day. On the whole, the majority of backbench members, regardless of party, came in later in life often having achieved quite a bit either in business or in trade unions. As a result I knew people who refused office in government because it interfered with their general plan in life.... It was regarded as a rather good thing in middle age to stand for your local borough or your local county. You obviously got prestige with it. But you weren’t a career politician in the conventional sense” (See also Bagehot 2017).

Is the trend inevitable? It is not at all likely that modern, professionalized parliaments will revert to the amateur models of the 1950s and 1960s. Professionalization is here to stay, and so are full-time professional politicians. But career politicians, a sub-type of professional politicians, need not sweep the field. First of all, their proliferation has not progressed as far as some of their critics suggest. From a cross-national perspective, it is clear that legislatures and parliaments include many representatives who are not even professional politicians (Mackenzie and Kousser 2014, 288). And in the British House of Commons, there are still “plenty of MPs who have a broader experience of the world,” (Cowley, 2012, 37) and who were first elected in their 40s and 50s (Allen 2013, 702; Wright 2013). Certainly the proponents of term limits have not given up hope. In many liberal democracies they are working to reduce

the numbers of career politicians or even get rid of them entirely (Carey, et al. 2000; Riddell 1996, 289).

Neither King (2015, 293-96) nor Riddell (1996, 289, 308), the concept's pioneering promoters, saw the proliferation of career politicians as unavoidable. More than 30 countries have introduced measures to increase the representation of racial, religious, linguistic, communal, indigenous and disabled minorities. Why not non-career politicians too? It is up to the gatekeepers, King argued, to the parties, constituency associations and, for ministerial appointments, to prime ministers and their advisors. They can, if they wish, balance selections of people who are career politicians with mature people who have done "real jobs" for significant periods of time. In Britain, Conservative Party Chairmen have sought to broaden candidate lists by recruiting more people who are in their 40s and 50s, people who have had successful careers in the professions and especially in business (Cairney 2007; Riddell 1996, 275). And there is a widely held view in the party that sitting MPs should still have part-time outside occupations "to keep them in touch with the real world of work" (Rush 2001, 119). On the Labour side, trade union leaders have called for the selection of more manual workers (Riddell 1996, 275) and Labour Leader Jeremy Corbin set out plans to use grants to enable the recruitment of working class MPs: "It is not enough to be for working people," he said, "we have to be of working people as well" (Syal 2015).

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