


BOOK REVIEW

Who Enters Politics and Why? Basic Human Values in the UK Parliament

by James Weinberg. Bristol: Bristol University Press. 2020. 232p. £75.00.

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Contrary to the prevailing narrative that all politicians are nothing more than privileged idlers, the decision to enter politics today is a very challenging, dare I say almost heroic, one. In fact, career politicians are obliged to operate in an anti-political climate that generates constant popular disdain and hostility towards political representatives and those holding institutional office.

This being the case, then it is natural to wonder who those attracted to a political career are. What individual qualities do they possess, and what reasons do they have for undertaking such an uncertain, tough, and at the end of the day somewhat unrewarding, career? Political science and political sociology scholars who have investigated this topic have tended to focus their attention, however, on the socio-demographic characteristics and the political and institutional features of political representatives. What has been developed to a far lesser extent, on the other hand, is the exploration of the individual motivations and underlying values of those individuals who decide to embark on a career in politics and who attain significant positions of power within the political sphere. Any such studies have generally been of a biographical (or on occasion auto-biographical) nature, or in any case of a qualitative character. There is a lack of more systematic studies conducted using quantitative methods.

In his work *Who enters politics and why? Basic human values in the UK parliament*, James Weinberg has tried to fill this gap. The most original aspect of Weinberg's work, and one that I personally consider appreciable, is his contribution to political science and political sociology from a different perspective, that of political psychology. There are basically three research questions that the author tries to answer in this work, namely:

- (1) Who enters politics and how do they differ from the general public?
- (2) Do politicians' personal qualities affect their behaviour once they have been elected to parliament?
- (3) Do voters really choose the 'wrong' politicians?

The research approach adopted by the author in responding to these three questions comprises a combination of different research techniques. Firstly, it should be pointed out that the research conducted and the reflections developed in this volume centre on what psychologists consider the 10 basic values characterizing the personality of each individual human being. These values are: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. The first important research tool employed by Weinberg to gather substantial information for the purposes of his analysis was a standard questionnaire submitted to UK parliamentarians. In addition to this main source of information, Weinberg also conducted a survey of local councillors (415 individuals), a secondary analysis of a representative sample of the

UK electorate taken from the European Social Survey (1557 individuals), 17 in-depth interviews with parliamentarians from different parties, a systemic analysis of official parliamentary documents, and an experiment involving 1637 UK citizens designed to establish the ideal qualities that a hypothetical parliamentary candidate should have. As we can see, the author's research strategy is an original, valuable, articulate one, and all things being considered is also logically coherent. The research design is thus unquestionably a strongpoint of this volume, to the point where, in my view, it could be adopted as a model by other scholars wishing to address the same research questions in other geographical contexts.

Without going into details of each stage of his research and of all the results obtained from the empirical exploration, which would be a difficult undertaking given the complexity of the research design and the issues investigated in this study, I am simply going to present the responses that Weinberg himself offers to the three questions at the centre of his analysis.

In responding to the first question, the author compares the order of importance of the 10 basic values held by the aforementioned three sample groups of parliamentarians, local politicians and UK citizens. The results show that the ranking of values of the three groups is very similar, with benevolence, universalism and self-direction always in the top three positions. Understandably, the value of power is ranked relatively higher – in sixth or seventh place – by the two groups of politicians (national and local), whereas the citizens group ranks it last of the 10 values considered. Consequently, one first response to research question number one is that citizens, local politicians and parliamentarians do not appear to possess very different basic values (values that are self-reported, of course).

A more interesting aspect that the author examines concerns the social, political, demographic and ethical factors which when taken account of can better predict who is likely to enter politics, and who is going to make a career of it. To this end, Weinberg takes the ESS sample and extracts from it those citizens who have unsuccessfully stood for election, and then compares them with local counsellors and parliamentarians. The conclusion he reaches is that certain values, such as power and benevolence, have a greater predictive value in regard to who is going to enter politics, than do the socioeconomic and demographic factors usually taken into account when analysing political careers and the political class, such as age, gender and education.

The second main research question that this book attempts to answer is dealt with empirically by examining the voting records of those parliamentarians considered in the study, together with certain other parliamentary activities for which a full account cannot be given here. Of course, the most important predictor of the voting behaviour of parliamentarians remains their party membership; however, the author finds that there are a growing number of cases of parliamentarians deviating from the party line, particularly among backbench MPs. Furthermore, not all votes in parliament are the same: in some cases, party pressure is greater, while in others the party leaves its MPs to vote as they wish. In order to evaluate the weight of party guidelines and that of MPs' values, Weinberg considers three different votes. In brief, the author concludes his analysis by stating that the values of MPs play a crucial role in explaining their voting behaviour in parliament, and in some cases, values are even more important than party allegiances. Party discipline and the pressure that parliamentarians endure from their electorate lead them to vote in a homogeneous manner, and in doing so they give the impression of a cohesive, compact parliamentary group. In reality, however, if one looks a little closer, what emerge are psychological cleavages that help account for the increasingly frequent episodes of parliamentary rebellion.

Weinberg responds to the third and final research question by conducting a conjoint experiment in which a sample of UK voters (numbering 1637) are asked to choose from among a number of hypothetical parliamentary representatives. The results of the experiment show that the sample of voters prefers, albeit to a moderate degree, female candidates to male candidates (even though there continue to be few women in parliament), and older candidates to younger ones. In keeping with the anti-political climate currently present in the UK and other western democracies, the experiment's participants expressed their preference for

candidates with no previous political experience, that is, for those who are not career politicians. Furthermore, the preferred candidates were those who had attended State schools rather than private schools, and who were married with children. The aforementioned characteristics help to delineate the ideal candidate, albeit to a somewhat limited degree. On the other hand, the sample of citizens gave much greater importance to certain other individual traits that a good MP should possess. Considerable weight was given, in fact, to religion, political priorities and basic values. Christian candidates were particularly favoured, whereas the profiles of hypothetical Muslim MPs were not deemed very appealing. Those candidates who emphasized the importance of the defence and promotion of the nation or of their own constituency were highly appreciated, unlike those who pursued the interests and political line of their own party. With regard to the values held by these hypothetical MPs, the most highly appreciated ones were universalism and benevolence, whereas those MPs who declared that they were driven by the desire for power were not chosen at all by the experiment's participants. Taking all of these variables into account, the results of the statistical analysis led Weinberg to conclude that "basic values had a greater impact on vote choice than any other physical, socioeconomic or political variable" (p. 156). In organizing the analysis according to the party allegiances of the experiment's participants, and analysing the basic values held by the 168 parliamentarians considered in the study, the author also finds a close correspondence between the identikit drawn by the voters of one party and their actual representatives. From this point of view therefore, voters do not choose the wrong politicians, but almost exactly those that they judge to be ideal for the job.

In short, Weinberg's book pursues a series of highly ambitious research objectives, and points to a worthwhile future line of research for political science and political sociology.