Politics has always been a hotly contested topic. Perhaps now more than ever, American politics are marred by disfunction and deep, fundamental disagreements on the role of government and what civic values—and to what extent—should be held and utilized in the public sphere and in government. Politicians themselves also have a celebrity-esque air about them. This has, perhaps, always been true to some extent. However, in our age of social media instant information that has provided an unprecedented view into public life, political stardom and the meteoric rise of political personalities has become all the more prolific. Even the previously ignored—by the general public at least—role of political staffers has garnered attention and those previously behind the scenes now command large followers of social media platforms like Twitter and are visible heads of movement- and ideology-based organizations outside the bounds of electoral campaigns or government offices of congressmen and senators.

Despite this increased access to information, public perception of professional politicians and political staffers carries a sort of mystique and they often remain controversial figures. The higher levels of access also increase the level of criticism for these people, and in our divided political life today this has translated to a great deal of ridicule of those public figures with whom we disagree, sometimes even rising to the level of abuse or threatening. It is no doubt that, politics and government is under a larger microscope than ever before, is more sophisticated than ever before, and therefore public life in the political arena has become a sort of pressure-cooker for many who are involved in this work. The hours are long, the pay is often lower than private sector work, and politics have always been considered a field with some of the highest levels of stress of any profession. Yet, more and more people continue to make the decision to work within the political sphere as staffers, elected officials, activists, and other roles. Given the ever-increasing demands of the work, people are motivated to take it on. Why someone becomes involved and makes it their life—for it’s truly a lifestyle—puzzles those who do not do so, or actively avoid politics as “toxic” or government as “ineffective.”

**Literature Review**

A great deal of work has focused on political motivation in public service management, as a collective action problem, or through survey research (Conway& Feigert 1968) (Duncan 2002) (Hitlin & Jackson 1977) (Gailmard 2010). However, seems there is virtually no research (at least none the author could find) that takes a primarily personal approach to understanding this motivation, which is what this study will examine. These studies, however, are useful on a macro level to understand how people as groups are motivated to work with public service, especially from the perspective of government reform or problem-solving.

A number of studies have analyzed data from delegates to national political conventions, tracking demographic shifts across time such as gender, age, or race (Roback 1980) (Hitlin & Jackson 1977). A great deal of these types of studies also make significant notes about “professional” and “amateur” political involvement, which has included the observation that political amateurs have taken on larger roles in political parties over time, and the once large gap between those professional “party regulars” and amateur or semi-professional “party reformers” concerning which group is more likely to hold party or public office has shrank significantly (Hitlin & Jackson 1977). These observations seem to coincide with observations of greater “active citizenship” in liberal democracies in general and have shown that the levels of civic engagement continue to increase (Marinetto 2003). These studies tell us who, on a macro scale, is getting involved.

Other studies have also analyzed demographic trends in political involvement and motivation with the question of what enables a person to become politically active in the first place. These studies have looked at issues such as level of education, economic class, and other social and contextual factors. These studies are helpful in telling us what types of people are most likely to become active in politics and government. They tell us that those with greater access to information and education, and who have greater financial means, are more likely to become politically active and are likely to do so at a younger age (Weber 2017). They also tell us that those whose contexts are more politically active are more likely to themselves be politically active, essentially that those whose social networks are larger and more politicized are likely to be more engaged (Leighley 1990).

Yet other studies have sought to answer the question none of the aforementioned research has considered: the individual motivations of politically active persons. For example, one study considered and built upon previous notions of motivation in political party organization involvement—specifically of partisan professionals—and examined models that postulated a materially-based incentive that was non-ideological and concerned with “obtaining votes for securing or maintaining the party in political control of the government” in a fashion associated with the historical political machines contrasted with more recent models that “portray the party activist as being more ideologically oriented, responding to ideological rather than material incentives, and seeking governmental reform or improved governmental services” and consider the environmental changes that have lead to such a shift in organizational style (Conway & Feigert 1968). Others have taken to the analysis of “self-interested and other-interested motives” of local elected officials (Ritz 2015). Another study takes a detailed analysis of many possible motivations and synthesizes data from many sources to make compelling arguments at different levels of certainty and provides a great amount of information as a meaningful and insightful aggregator and interpreter of the data, building on the substantial work of prior studies (Hansen 1978). All of these studies, however, focused on individual motivations, are conducted by surveys or data aggregation and analysis. While very useful for our purposes, the difference in methodology is important. It is to this consideration we will now turn.

**Methodology**

This study makes used of semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. Individuals were solicited directly or indirectly by the author from his network connections as a political staffer and party office holder. Participants were considered qualified for the study if they had significant (multiple election cycles or legislative sessions) experience as a political staffer or volunteer, if they held public or party office, or had engaged in political advocacy/activism through interest groups.

Interviews are the most common method utilized in qualitative research (Hawkins 2018). For this reason, the author of this study was surprised to find no interview studies concerned with political and civic engagement motivations of individuals, a topic that seems to be almost exclusively researched through questionnaire or survey data. Live interviews, either in person or through some media (e.g. phone or video conferencing), are especially useful in obtained detailed information about the perspective and experiences of research participants and are often used to uncover personal or even sensitive information (McNamara 1999). It is for this reason that it is the chosen method for this study that seeks to uncover personal motivations of individuals.

In particular, semi-structured interviews have been chosen because they allow a flexibility between the researcher and research study participants to explore responses in real time, allowing the interviewer to ask unplanned follow-up questions or additional commentary in a conversational atmosphere that is not present in a questionnaire or a more formal, structured interview environment (DeJonckheere & Vaughn 2019). This method, therefore, will yield more detailed and more personal information about individual motivations than previous studies and allow us to examine with great depth the experiences and perspectives that have led real people to dedicate their life to politics and public service.

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