A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS

FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISM

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**Abstract**

This study examined the personal motivations of political operatives and activists for their work. Three such persons participated in recorded phone interviews that were transcribed and analyzed for common themes.

Results from the study concluded three main aspects of political involvement including initial motivations to enter political work, reasons for continuing in that work and how participant perspectives on their work and motivations have changed over time. While these aspects were common to all participants, the experience and perspectives of each were significantly different, and indicate a complex relationship between political work and those who choose to take it up.

Politics has always been a hotly contested topic. Perhaps now more than ever, American politics are marred by dysfunction 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 have large numbers of followers on social media platforms like Twitter and are visible heads of movements and ideology-based organizations outside the bounds of electoral campaigns or government offices of congressmen or 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 are under a larger microscope than ever before, are 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 keep choosing 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; Gailmard 2010; Hitlin & Jackson 1977). However, it seems there is no research 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.

Several 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). Some of these 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 led 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 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 as we ask, “What experiences and motivations lead to the decision to become involved in politics and what continues to motivate their involvement to this day?”

**Methodology**

This study makes use of semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. 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 questionnaires or survey data. Live interviews, either in person or through some media (e.g. phone or video conferencing), are especially useful in obtaining 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.

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. Potential participants were called by the researcher, who explained the research question and methods to be used during the interview and asked if they wished to participate. A total of three interviews were conducted with three different participants. Interviews were conducted by phone and digitally recorded, either on third-party devices or via Google Voice’s call recording software.

**Results**

After the interviews responses of the participants were later transcribed and those transcription responses were coded for data comparison. These codes were then analyzed for recurring or similar concepts, occurrences, or themes. Categories were then refined and simplified to reflect the most frequent reoccurrences across all interviews. This process yielded three main categories as common for all interviewees.

*Motivations for Initial Involvement*

Participants cited an interesting array of motivations and reasons why they had taken their first steps towards working in politics. Wren (55-year-old female), a long-time political staffer who later was elected to both party offices and public office in local government, cited her youth and family has having been surrounded by political engagement and always seeing it as something important. She had generations of public officials in her family, “It’s always been a part of my family construct. . .my dad’s older brother was a Member of Congress and my dad’s father was a state legislator and his father was a local judge,” she said of her family history, and then spoke about growing up around,“[The] whole concept of, other people are watching ice hockey or something and we always have the news on at our house, the politics part of the news…I always felt like that was my avenue of activism.”

On the other hand, the other participants had a moment they felt they could cite as why they became actively involved. Rachel (56-year-old female), a consultant and local party leader who had previously been a local elected official in Canada before naturalizing to the United States, recounted the moment that led her to first run for office with virtually no prior experience. She explained that she first truly became involved by running for municipal office in a small village in Ontario over water quality issues, “[I]t was really clear to me,” she said, “[that], as a community, we should care for the water quality of the whole community and I decided to run for municipal office. I didn't know anything about running.” Her election spurned in her a desire extend that activism and be more involved on a larger level, “since the environment has always concerned me, I got involved in the Green Party in Ontario…and I did what I could…working for candidates, attending events, looking for ways to encourage the currently elected officials to think globally about environmental issues and our planet.” Rachel’s initial motivation, compared to Wren’s, was far more tied to a specific moment and issue that stirred her to particular action, rather than Wren’s experience of having “grown up” around an active political life within her family.

Vaughn (56-year-old male), a political staffer who now owns his own campaign consulting firm and has been active in his state political party, also cites a moment where he first become involved, although in a different way and with different motivations:

I was a senior in high school and my friend had gotten a job on Ted Kennedy’s 1980 presidential campaign and he asked me if I wanted to join him, so I got my mom to agree to let me go to Pennsylvania for a few weeks, and we worked in New Jersey after that and had the opportunity to work in that primary and just got hooked.

However, he also shared that prior to his work on the campaign, Vaughn had participated in a student walk-out down to the Brooklyn Board of Education on behalf of teacher’s seeking pay raises for their involvement in extra-curricular activity. “That was my first real act of political involvement,” he remembered, “walking out of school and marching over the Brooklyn Bridge to the Board of Ed.” Vaughn’s experiences differ from both the other participants in that it was more opportunistic. Wren had simply always lived with the expectation of involvement and Rachel was motivated by a specific issue, whereas Vaughn had been aware and taken a short-term action (a walk out) instead of a longer commitment (such as winning municipal office like Rachel) but ultimately was “hooked” on political engagement not from an innate desire but from the opportunity of a friend to take a job.

At the same time, these were not actions of people who had previously not been aware of politics in a more passive way. Vaughn noted that he, “always read the papers, watched the news. I always kept up with current events even as a teenager. It was always part of what I did.” He had also previously decided to major in political science at UC Berkeley where he went to college, although he had also considered pre-law. Rachel had a poignant story of her parents also being immigrants and remembering how important it was to her at eighteen to vote. She shared:

I remember turning 18 and there was just no question I was going to go vote. I don't even remember what the first thing I voted for was but there was the expectation in my family, I think because [on both sides of my family we had] fairly recent immigrants. My father had been born in Canada and my mother was not and I just remembered that we had this right to vote and that it was important for us to be engaged…I don't remember necessarily any arguments or a need for challenging that expectation that, of course, I would be involved. I remember having an experience very dramatically.

Despite Rachel having a “call to action” type moment in her late 20s, this demonstrates that there was always an understanding of the importance of being involved politically at some level, even if that just meant to vote. This is very similar to Wren’s perspective, even though it is to a lesser degree, just as Vaughn had always seen it as important and interesting. While their initial push to take on politics and government as a serious endeavor in their lives (i.e., beyond simply being voters and becoming activists or party/elected officials) all happened at different times and in different ways, all three participants understood from an early age that civic engagement was important and meaningful.

*Motivations for Continued Involvement*

During the interviews participants were also asked about their continued involvement in politics and how their motivations may have changed, either over time or as the result of specific moments of change/clarity that shifted their perspective. Interestingly, two of the three felt that their motivations and expectations had not significantly changed in the course of their political involvement, even if their understandings and perspectives on how government works (or doesn’t) have changed. Vaughn shared:

In my mid- to late-twenties I was …much more ideological…and gradually as I grew, I wouldn’t say my views on issues didn’t necessarily change but my general approach began to change in that I started to understand a more diplomatic approach. As far as interest it sort of ebbs and flows.

He also spoke about taking roughly 20 years out of active politics to raise his son as a single father, placing family first and working two jobs to make ends meet. Afterwards, he says:

[W]hen I got re-involved around 2011 or 2012 I was reinvigorated…[but] you have periodic experiences of burnout and frustration and you work through them and [you get] beyond that—I don't want say naivete but you know what I'm saying—it's a different view of it.

Others felt like their positions were less changed, or unchanged. Rachel stated plainly, “I think my motivation has not changed. My personality, my drivers, the things that matter most to me mean that I will always be politically engaged. Now, do I necessarily feel motivated to do it in the way I have in the past? Maybe not…but I think it is [now] the same amount of motivation, and I recognize that the way that I exert that activity related to my motivation shifts.”

Wren, however, had a very nuanced perspective and observed that she felt busier and more involved now than ever, “Working for campaigns is almost like a sickness…like Max Cleland [former US Senator from Georgia] jokes, ‘the only cure for the political bug is formaldehyde.’” She recounted her realization that campaign work had consumed her life to the point of being unhealthy, and took a job outside of government and politics to get away, but ended up right back in it, “I have [the bug],” she said, “I turned my job into another campaign job. And now being an elected official and my [day job: working with candidates, progressive groups, and elected officials to use technology to interact with voters/volunteers/constituents] gets my fingers into a lot of different pies and then my positions on the DNC and my…involvement on [the national board] of the DMO (Democratic Municipal Officials…in some ways I have more layers now than when I was in the heart of campaigning.”

When asked about the differences of feeling motivated and reasons for continued involvement now compared to when she first began, she commented, “First and foremost, it’s very different.” She explained the difference she felt between her initial work as a volunteer, when politics were a “hobby” versus when it became her life. “I think now it's a different…there is a responsibility and the weight of that is different every day.” She explained how sometimes this weight is a “wonderful weight”, such as when she can help someone solve a problem or make an improvement. “This is why I signed up for this, because I can help somebody,” and contrasted that with having to make really difficult decisions that, while they may be for the common good can hurt individuals. As a example, she spoke of the coronavirus pandemic and decisions she had to make and support in reaction to it:

You don't know if you're making the right decisions and that's very painful. I put my friends out of work, my friends I know who will live paycheck-to-paycheck, I said “you need to close” because I thought that was the right decision for our community. you know that was very painful and very difficult and very hard stressful isn't the right word for it it's not a strong enough word.

In the end, the question of continued motivation seems to be just as complicated and nuanced as the reasons why participants first became involved. As they grew into their political lives and found avenues for involvement, none offered experiences of thoughts of a paradigm-shifting magnitude and believe they more-or-less hold to the same ideologies they once did, although their methods of engagement and avenues of pursuit may have changed, in some cases radically, they all continue to look towards the goals that first inspired them to become politically active.

*Importance of Political Participation*

The participant’s thoughts on this topic were interesting varied. “It’s difficult for me, because I don’t really get it,” said Wren, “I always joke that as a bookish person I should’ve become a teacher and would teach math because I get how people wouldn’t like math but not how people don’t like government because it’s been such a central part of my life.” However, she says she understands why people could be disillusioned, “We often do a bad job of showing people their value…they matter, their involvement matters, and we’re not going to have a truly representative community if more people aren’t involved…I want people to participate whether or not they agree with me…representation matters.”

Rachel’s remarks were brief, “I’ve [had a lot of these kinds of conversations] and have been fairly successful [at it]…In 2018, I probably recruited 20 people to take some kind of political action they had never done…[To me], that you would by in action choose to not engage in a process that…changes the future of world, literally the world: why would you give up that…power that’s open to you?” She recognized that exercising that power can be frustrating and said that, despite being a local party chair, she finds partisanship to be a barrier to improvement, still the exercise of those rights, for her, is important and meaningful.

Of the three participants, Vaughn was most understanding of the distrustfulness many feel, “A little bit of skepticism, a little bit distrust…is okay. You don’t want to be complacent. I don’t believe in blind faith. I don’t think either party is perfect…be vigilant but sticking your head in the sand isn’t the answer. You can make change…sometimes it’s slow…but people can make a difference.”

All participants arrive, unsurprisingly, at the conclusion that involvement is meaningful and important, but they take rather different paths to reach that conclusion, from not really understanding how people can choose disengagement, to recognizing the frustrations, to even seeing distrust as a healthy mechanism in proportion. These answers seem to provide insight into each of their views of how government should function, how it actually functions, and what it means to be politically active and engaged.

**Discussion**

This study has endeavored to explore the complex motivations of people who choose to dedicate their lives, as activists, as political staffers, as party leaders, as consultants or as elected officials to the political process. It is a humble study with a small number of participants, all members of the Democratic Party and all roughly the same age and so the research question surely begs for further research across various demographics to achieve a fuller picture than time and resources have allowed from this work. It is the hope of the author, however, that these novel and deeply nuanced understandings provide new insights to the lives and motives of such individuals and spur on the work of other researchers to pick up where this study has left off. Some potential avenues for further studies would analyze a broader cross-section of demographics and what relationship age, gender, race, national origin and other identities has upon personal motivations and whether patterns can be gleaned based on these categories. Further study on the shift in motivations over time would also be a welcome addition to this work, as this study has only scratched the surface of this dynamic between experience, ideology, and paradigm shifts over time. As indicated in the literature review, political operatives have become less partisan and more ideological in their approach (which mirrors the increasing ideological nature of U.S. political parties) and tracking this shift through the lens of personal motivations appears as a promising and intriguing line of inquiry.

What we have seen is, despite the small size of this study, there is already great diversity among thoughts, opinions, and experiences that shape the lives of people who commit themselves to this often misunderstood or even maligned work. There is also, evident in the data, a dynamism to motivation that changes over time and people almost always seem to find themselves taking on tasks and setting goals they never imagined they would be tackling themselves, and despite the obstacles and frustrations they have which are generally shared by the public at-large, they see changes they have been able to execute and the potential for a better future and for a better world.

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