



GOVERNANCE

How to get good politicians

What factors determine whether well-educated, dedicated people choose to go into politics?

Politicians can shape the fortunes of countries. Presidents, in particular, set the tone: balancing many stakeholder interests, their job is to create a unifying vision that should guide policymaking. Members of parliament act upon this vision, designing and implementing policies that affect the lives of millions of people. One would imagine, then, that those with the best aptitude for leadership get elected.

That is the theory. But in practice politics is a messy business. For many reasons, it is often not the smartest candidate who gets elected, or the most effective member who gets selected for higher honours.

Some economic models even explain why it is not the most capable that move up: Someone without a proper education (but a charismatic personality) has a much higher chance to see greater returns in politics than in the private sector. (In technical terms, lower opportunity costs give the less able a comparative advantage at entering public life.)

These selection effects are compounded by the free-rider problem in politics, where work effort is not directly correlated to political outcomes. In other words, **according to this model, it is society's "chancers" who are more likely to end up in politics – and the hard-working, smart ones will tend to end up in the private sector.**

Competency in public office is, of course, not the only goal of a parliamentary system. Representation – having politicians that reflect the demographic and geographic make-up of society at large – is also a key concern. But competency and representation, at least theoretically, do not always correlate.

Take the following example: a proportional representation system, like we have in South Africa, would require members of all districts to be represented. But what if one region – let's call it Farmville – has few university-trained citizens, whereas another region – Science City – has many citizens with university degrees? A proportional representation system will necessitate some Farmville politicians also be elected to parliament, even though the Science City

politicians will probably be best qualified for the job. In contrast, in a plurality rule system – where the candidate with the most votes gets the job – competency often trumps representation.

A new National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) working paper – *Who Becomes a Politician?* – by five Swedish social scientists, casts doubt on this trade-off. Using an extraordinarily rich dataset on the social background and competence levels of Swedish politicians and the general public, they show that an “inclusive meritocracy” is an achievable goal, i.e. a society where competency and representation correlate in public office.

They find that Swedish politicians are, on average, significantly smarter and better leaders than the population they represent. This, they find, is not because Swedish politicians are only drawn from the elite of society; in fact, the representation of politicians in Swedish municipalities, as measured by parental income or occupational class, is remarkably even. They conclude that there is at best a weak trade-off between competency and representation, mostly because there is “strong positive selection of politicians of low (parental) socioeconomic status”.

These results are valid for Sweden, of course, which is a country unlike South Africa. Yet there are lessons that we can learn. First, what seems to matter is a combination of “well-paid full-time positions and a strong intrinsic motivation to serve in uncompensated ones”. In other words, a political party in SA that rewards hard work for those who serve in uncompensated positions is likely to see the best leaders rise to the top, where they should be rewarded with market-related salaries. Second, an electoral system which

allows parties to “represent various segments of society”. Political competition is good. Third, the “availability of talent across social classes”. This, they argue, is perhaps unique to Sweden, known for its universal high-quality education.

This reminded me of our State of the Nation red carpet event, where the cameras fixated on the gowns and glamour of SA's political elite. How do the levels of competency in our Parliament, I wondered, compare to Sweden and other countries?

Let's just look at the top of the pyramid.

The president of Brazil, Michel Temer, completed a doctorate in public law in 1974. He has published four major books in constitutional law. The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, also has a PhD in law, although his initial field of study was chemical engineering. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, has a master's degree in political science. **Former US President Barack Obama** graduated *magna cum laude* with a doctor of jurisprudence degree from Harvard University. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, has a PhD in quantum chemistry. Most of these widely respected leaders gave up a top job in the private sector or academe to pursue a political career.



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Politics is messy, but given the right conditions, it can still attract high-quality leaders. For that to happen, though, aspiring politicians must put in the hard yards, even if initially uncompensated, supported by a competitive political party system and broad access to quality education. SA, unfortunately, is still a long way from meeting these criteria. ■

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