# Human after all?
# Public perceptions, politicians' lived experiences and interest representation

## Pre-analysis plan

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August 30, 2024

## 1 Study Information

Political elites have for a long time not only emphasised their policy focus and priorities, but also tried to display themselves as regular humans with common hobbies and interests. For example, many US presidents, such as Eisenhower, Kennedy, Ford, Bush, Clinton, and Trump among them, have been characterised as enthusiastic golfers (Moore and Dewberry, 2012; Watterson, 2006). On the other hand, former UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's personal web page states that he enjoys "keeping fit, cricket, football and movies" (Rishi Sunak, 2024), while current PM and Labour Party leader Keir Starmer's profile describes him as "obsessed with football" (Labour Party, 2024). As well as advertising their hobbies in their own communication, politicians' leisure activities may also be the focus of media coverage via interviews, profile pieces, or as part of a wider news story. For example, former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin received worldwide media scrutiny of her leadership abilities after video footage emerged of her dancing at a party with friends.

All this calls to question why political elites often seem to go to great lengths to advertise their non-professional pursuits and hobbies, and how it matters for elections and the representation

process. We argue in this study that one of the motivations for politicians to appear as a 'real person' with actual interests and hobbies is that of increased perceived issue competence and, subsequently, vote maximization. Indeed, emerging evidence indicates that voters prefer politicians that appear more 'human' to them (Clarke et al., 2018; Garzia, 2011; Valgarðsson et al., 2021). However, research on the exact mechanism of how a politician can appear 'more human' and how this may influence the way in which voters perceive their specific issue competence and likability is lacking. To fill this gap, we aim to collect data from a conjoint-design survey experiment to examine how emphasizing different types of hobbies may influence whom voters perceive as the most competent on specific policy areas, such as the economy, child care, transportation, and environmental policy – and whom they overall see as their preferred representative.

Building on theories of information shortcuts (Lupia, 1994) and in-group bias (Lindeman, 1997), we theorize that certain pursuits and hobbies are likely linked to increased (or decreased) perceived issue competence on specific issues. For example, a politician with a background in mountain rescue may be considered as more knowledgeable of current issues and concerns in environmental policy than someone who does not mention such interests. Similarly, a voter who regularly volunteers as mountain rescuer likely evaluates a fellow rescuer as more capable – and more likely – of dealing with a policy area related to their hobby due to in-group bias and preference. Effectively, not only do citizens hold biases and assumptions about individuals that participate in certain pursuits, but their own recreational experiences further colour these perceptions.

The theory and results hold important consequences for election strategy and policy-making. The prevalence of professional politicians and those from a fairly limited socio-demographic and occupational background likely limits the extent to which voters trust them on a range of policy areas on pressing issues. Although substantial work focuses on identified differences between politicians' of differing demographic backgrounds, individuals' biases and distinct knowledge of certain recreations offers another source of lived experiences that cannot easily be recreated by other means. These lived experiences offer the potential to understand the broader disconnect that many citizens feel with politicians cross-nationally and also provide a means for parties to consider expanding their base of support, by reaching out to those with distinctive knowledge of societal groups.

# 2 Study Design

## 2.1 Experiments

Our design utilizes a conjoint framework (Bansak et al., 2021; Hainmueller et al., 2015), where we will present respondents with three sets of candidates, varying the candidates' individual characteristics (see Figure 1 for an illustrative example), before asking respondents to evaluate, which of the candidates would be their preferred representative (MP), and which candidate is more competent on the following set of issues (question order randomly assigned):

Environmental policy;

Child care policy;

Economic policy;

Transportation policy.

The experiment presents information on politicians' party, political experience, previous occupation, gender (name), and age. We will vary the values of all of these five variables, while keeping age always between 52-58 years as we are not interested in studying the differences between perceived issue competence and likeability of younger and older politicians. We utilize vignettes, rather than a tabular format, to present the information to respondents in a realistic and familiar style, similar for example to political candidate's web pages or candidate profiles in a news article.

Our primary treatment variable refers to **candidates' hobbies** that included five options:

Cycling;

Golfing;

Hillwalking (a common term for hiking in the UK);

Running;

Watching television (baseline category, signalling no specific issue competence related to the hobby).

We expect these treatments to serve as information heuristics to respondents on the competencies of the candidates.

We also randomize across the other listed attributes as follows:

**Political Party**: Labour Party OR Conservative Party;

**Political experience**: Elected to the House of Commons for the first time in 2024 (not so experienced politician) OR in 2010 (experienced politician);

**Previous occupation**: Law, business, the party office;

**Gender**: Female (Angela Brown, Mary Hull, Christine Long, Julie Sands) OR Male (John Green, Simon Walton, Mark Davies, Michael Sanders);

**Age**: Randomised, but always a value between 52 and 58.

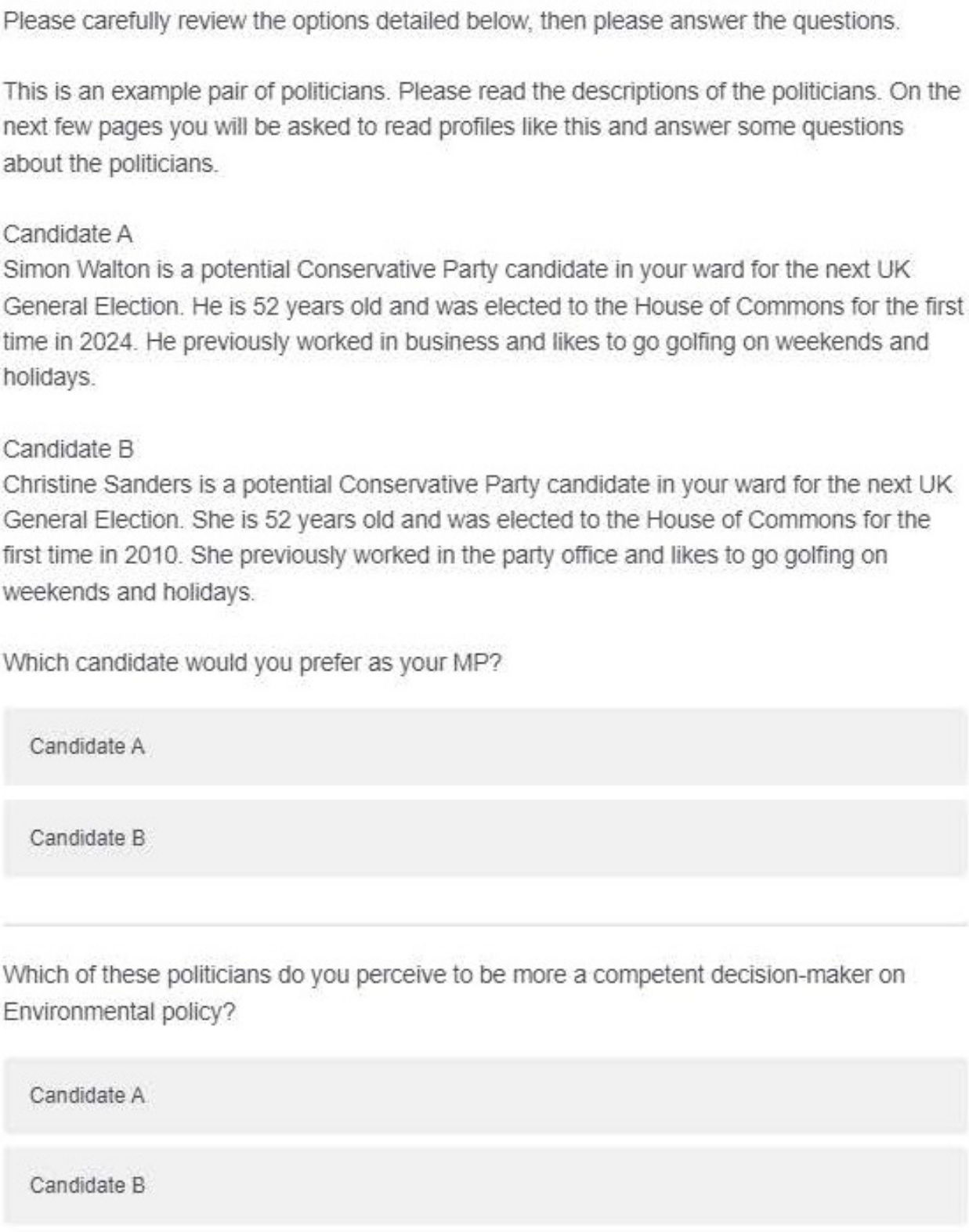


**Figure 1:** Illustration of the Experimental set up

To maximise the benefits of a conjoint design, each respondent will be given three vignette pairs to evaluate in succession. Following Stefanelli and Lukac (2020), we expect that a 5-level variable in a conjoint with 3 tasks requires 1,000 respondents to achieve 80% power with an expected effect size of 0.05.[1] In a pre-test for a similar design involving just over 225 respondents, the effect size for cyclists and hillwalkers varied from 0.1 to 0.3 on the primary issues of interest. Runners also demonstrated an effect size of 0.05 or greater on all but environmental issues, where the estimated effect dropped to 0.12. Golfers regularly demonstrated an effect size of greater than 0.05 except for transport policy where they dropped to just below 0.03.

Based on these considerations, we set the sample size at 1,200 participants.

Participants will also answer a series of questions concerning their own recreational interests and political attitudes.

To determine respondents' own backgrounds, we presented respondents with a range of common recreations ranging from "Arts and Crafts" to "Watching Sports" and "Video Games". The list of recreations also included the five recreations included in the conjoint experiment to evaluate any shared preferences for those candidates.

*'We would like to know more about your hobbies and interests. From the list below, please select your top three personal interests.'*

- Video games
- Rowing
- Food
- Running
- Skiing/Snowboarding
- Health and Fitness
- Camping
- Pets
- Travel

[1] See this shiny app for an example: ¸

- Socializing
- Swimming
- Hillwalking
- Reading and/or Writing
- Technology / Computers
- Playing sports, please specify
- Music
- Hunting
- Golf
- Watching Sports
- Arts and Crafts
- Cycling
- Watching television
- Other, please specify

To distinguish between hobbies that respondents engage with varying intensity, we also ask them to *'Please rank these hobbies and interests based on how important they are to you where the number one is your top priority.'*

Finally, we also collected information on previous vote choice, respondent gender, and political preferences over the key issues of interests (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Question wording for respondent issue preferences

A quality check question relating to the conjoint vignettes will also be included to ensure all responses are reliable. Our quality check question is as follows: *'Which issue was not a policy area mentioned in the preceding questions over politician competencies?'*

Childcare;

Brexit;

Transportation

Those failing this attention check will be removed from the sample.

## 2.2 Sample size

We plan to field the experiment using a sample of UK voters. A representative sample of approx. 1,200 respondents will be sourced by Prolific from across the UK. If greater than 10% of respondents fail the quality attention check, we will return the survey to the field with identical question wording to increase our sample size to a total figure closer to 1,200 quality respondents.

## 2.3 Data collection and timeline

We will use the Prolific online panel to recruit a representative sample of UK based respondents. We will start the collection on August 30th to be completed by September 6th,2024.

# 3 Main expectations & hypotheses

Scholarship on descriptive representation suggest that candidates' socio-demographic characteristics, such as candidate gender and race, act as powerful heuristics for vote choice (Cutler, 2002; McDermott, 1997, 1998). But what about candidate backgrounds that go beyond socio-demographic characteristics? Building on the research conceptualizing candidate characteristics as information shortcuts, we argue that non-professional pursuits and hobbies can also be used by voters as heuristics for issue competence and vote choice (as well as general likability).

The logic follows that respondents use statements about hobbies as information about the past socialisation experiences and priorities that politicians hold. For example, membership in a sports club, an amateur theatre group, bird watchers or mountain rescue could all result in socialisation effects (Mortimer and Simmons, 1978; Rosow, 1974). In each of these examples, the experience of participating in these activities likely leads individuals to develop shared knowledge of the regulations, resource needs, and challenges associated with their hobbies. Dedicating substantial time and resources to undertake an activity, not only likely provides individuals with detailed information about a subject, that is very hard to learn in other settings, but also we argue increases their perceived competence on the issue by others.

This logic leads us to propose two connected main hypotheses – and a series of more specific hypotheses – predicting that citizens use candidates' non-professional pursuits and hobbies as information shortcuts to inferred competencies and qualifications.

**Hypothesis 1:** Respondents will be more likely to perceive those candidates as competent on a specific issue whose hobbies suggest a link to the specific policy area.

To be more specific, due to certain hobbies being more directly related to the environment, we expect:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Respondents to be more likely to perceive those candidates who list cycling, running or hillwalking as a hobby to be more competent on environmental policy than those who list golfing or watching TV as their hobby.

In terms of transportation policy, we expect a hobby signalling regular use of roads to send a cue of added competence, which is why we expect:

**Hypothesis 1b:** Respondents to be more likely to perceive those candidates who list cycling as a hobby to be more competent on transport policy than those who list running, hillwalking, golfing or watching TV as their hobby.

As it is difficult to see a direct link between any of the listed hobbies and added competence on child care or economic policy, we refrain from posing any specific hypotheses related to these two policy areas.

**Hypothesis 2:** Due to in-group bias and preference, respondents are more likely to consider a politician with similar interests and hobbies to themselves as their preferred representative than those with different hobbies.

In the British context, in particular, certain pastimes have become cultural signifiers of class identity due to historical class divisions in who had economic and social access to particular activities, how they were supported by educational and social institutions, and how they were represented in the media. These associations between hobbies and social class may in turn influence voters' preferences. Experimental evidence shows that British voters generally prefer politicians from working-class backgrounds (Campbell et al., 2019). Therefore, a candidate who advertises a stereotypically working-class hobby may be deemed more in touch with ordinary people and thus more likeable in comparison to a candidate with a stereotypically upper-class hobby. Given that golfing is likely the hobby in our list most likely related to class, we develop more specific hypotheses related to a preferred representative.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Respondents to be less likely to consider those candidates who list golfing as their hobby as their preferred representative than those with different hobbies.

Building on the elaborations above, we also expect the perceived approachability of politicians to

vary dependent on their hobbies and the hobbies that the respondents list. Our general hypothesis regarding approachability is as follows:

**Hypothesis 3:** Due to in-group bias and preference, respondents are more likely to consider a politician with similar interests and hobbies to themselves as more approachable than those with different hobbies.

Similarly to the preferred representative hypothesis, we also expect perceived approachability to be influenced by the extent to which certain hobbies signal class background. As such, we develop the following additional hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Respondents to be less likely to consider those candidates who list golfing as their hobby as approachable compared to those with different hobbies.

We also expect our other covariates to affect the perceived competence and overall likability. As recent research on women's political representation suggest that voters present a slight preference towards female politicians over men (Golder et al., 2017; Philpot and Walton Jr, 2007; Schwarz and Coppock, 2022; Stegmaier et al., 2014; Wäckerle, 2022), we posit the following hypotheses related to the politician's gender.

**Hypothesis 4:** Respondents will be more likely to perceive female candidates than male as competent on a specific issue, and especially in the case of issues that are traditionally considered feminine issue areas (i.e., child care policy).

**Hypothesis 5:** Respondents are more likely to consider female politicians as their preferred representative compared to men.

**Hypothesis 6:** Respondents are more likely to consider female politicians as approachable compared to men.

Besides gender, party ID also sends an important information cue. As the Labour Party and the

Conservative Party are associated with different issue ownership, we also develop the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 7a:** Respondents will be more likely to perceive Labour candidates compared to Conservative candidates as competent on environmental policy and child care policy.

**Hypothesis 7b:** Respondents will be more likely to perceive Conservative candidates compared to Labour candidates as competent on economic policy.

**Hypothesis 8:** Due to in-group bias and preference, respondents who voted in the last election for Labour are more likely to consider a Labour politician as their preferred representative and vice versa.

Finally, we also expect previous occupation to be used by the respondents as a potential cue of policy competence. As such, we pose the following further hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 9:** Respondents will be more likely to perceive candidates with a background in business as competent on economic policy compared to candidates with other occupational backgrounds.

# 4 Analysis

## 4.1 Operationalization of variables

We plan to operationalize the variables used in the hypotheses above as follows:

- Each of the treatments will be coded as a set of binary variables dependent on which politician pairings respondents received. In each case the analysis will compare effect of the primary treatment (candidate's hobby) relative to the other outcomes for the primary treatment, treating 'watching television' as the baseline category.

- In terms of the secondary four treatment areas (candidate's party, political experience, previous occupation, and gender), in each case the analysis will compare effect of the treatments relative to the other outcomes for the secondary four treatment areas.
- The three dependent variables – who is the preferred representative; who is perceived as more approachable; and who is perceived as more competent on specific policy area – will be coded as binary variables.
- The primary analysis will consist of simple difference of means tests, Ordinary Least Squares and Logistic regression.
- Further analysis considering the impact of party identification, respondent's gender, and respondent's own hobbies as moderating variables will evaluate the extent to which the effects are driven by those identifying more similarly with the preferred politician.

## 4.2 Additional variables of interest

- *Party ID*: we will manually code respondent's party ID based on their answer to the question 'Which of the following parties would you vote for if an election were held today? – Conservative Party; Labour Party; Liberal Democrats; Green Party; Another party (please specify); Wouldn't vote'.
- *Voter / non-voter*: we will rely on the answer to the question above to manually code if the respondent is a likely voter (specified a party they would vote for) or a likely non-voter (specified they wouldn't vote).
- *Support for increased funding for child care*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("How much do you support or oppose the following policy initiatives? Responses are recorded on a 5-point scale from: "Strongly oppose" to "Strongly support", including a "Don't know" option).
- *Support for strong government intervention to tackle inflation and grow the economy*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("How much do you support or oppose

the following policy initiatives? Responses are recorded on a 5-point scale from: "Strongly oppose" to "Strongly support", including a "Don't know" option).

- *Support for increased environmental protection*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("How much do you support or oppose the following policy initiatives? Responses are recorded on a 5-point scale from: "Strongly oppose" to "Strongly support", including a "Don't know" option).

- *Support for increased funding for public transportation*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("How much do you support or oppose the following policy initiatives? Responses are recorded on a 5-point scale from: "Strongly oppose" to "Strongly support", including a "Don't know" option).

- *Respondent's hobbies*: we will rely on the answer to the following questions in the survey for this ("We would like to know more about your hobbies and interests. From the list below, please select your top three personal interests." And "Please rank these hobbies and interests based on how important they are to you where the number one is your top priority.") for manually coding each hobby the respondent lists as well as whether their hobby matches with the hobby in the treatment.

- *Gender*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?" "Prefer not to say", "Male", "Female", "In another way").

- *Class*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular class?" "Yes, working class", "Yes, middle class", "Yes, other", "No", "Don't know").

- *Ethnicity/race*: we will rely on the answer to a question in the survey for this ("To which of these groups do you consider you belong?" "White British", "Any other white background", "White and Black Carribbean", "White and Black African", "White and Asian", "Any other mixed background (please explain)", "Indian", "Pakistani", "Bangladeshi", "Any other Asian background", "Black Carribbean", "Black African", "Any other black background (please ex-

plain)", "Chinese", "Other ethnic group (please explain)", "Prefer not to answer or don't know").

# 5 Ethics

This study has received ethics clearance as part of the ethical review of the project "Human after all? Public perceptions, politicians' lived experiences and interest representation" from Newcastle University's Ethics Committee (Ref: 49691/2023). Participants will be informed that they are under no obligation to participate or complete the survey and data will be anonymized. The investigators will not have access to the identities or information that would easily be linked to the identity of individual participants. The survey responses will be collected on Qualtrics survey platform, relying on a sample provided by Prolific, both being well-known survey companies that are commonly used for surveys in political science. There are no risks to subjects from responding to the survey.

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