

Transformative experiences in political life¹

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How should we make decisions about important choices in our lives? Typically, we want to make decisions in such a way that meets standards of rationality, reviewing the evidence, but that also feels authentic and allows us to place our personal thoughts and feelings at the heart of the decision-making process. Traditionally, we are advised to subjectively imagine ourselves living the outcomes of each available option. Having done this, we then weigh the projected scenarios and opt for the one which we anticipate being the best. This model, the normative rational model, is the one we are expected to adopt when we are deciding things like which career to pursue, whether to have children, and whether to move from one country to another.

However, recent work by L.A. Paul has highlighted multiple instances where this model no longer seems to hold. In these cases, which Paul refers to as 'transformative experiences', it is stipulated that the normative rational decision model does not apply in a way that allows us to maintain both the rational and authentic dimensions of the process.² Such cases are considered to be both epistemically and personally transformative, providing the agent with information they could not access without

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² L.A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); L.A. Paul 'What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting', *Res Philosophica* 92/2 (2015), 149-170; L.A. Paul 'Précis of *Transformative Experience*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. XCI/3 (2015), 760-765.

undergoing the experience in question, and transforming their individual preferences in the process. Combined, these prevent the individual from assigning subjective utility to the experience before it has taken place in a way that would enable us to accurately assess the possible outcomes we might face.

Paul and others reflecting on her work have identified numerous diverse transformative experiences such as having a child, reversing congenital hearing loss via medical intervention, and experiencing serious illness.³ In this paper, I consider the implications of her argument for political life and make the case that many commonplace experiences undergone by individuals as they interact with, and act within, a political system can be considered as transformative and, consequently, that decisions made about these are in violation of the normative rational model. I begin by outlining the general concept of transformative experience in greater detail and then apply the argument to the case of holding political office. Following this, I discuss further potential applications to common areas of interest within political science, namely the cases of voting and decision-making about public policy.

I. Transformative experiences and rational decision-making

The idea that a rational decision is one where an agent picks the best of all possible options is familiar. When choosing, an agent assesses the anticipated value of each outcome, ranks them, and selects that which is best. However, these strict principles are theorized for 'ideal agents in ideal circumstances', not for ordinary agents in the real world.⁴ In reality, as we navigate choices we face in our lives, our ability to meet these standards is limited - we might not have access to all the relevant information, or might lack the expertise to establish which of the options on offer is the optimal one. To account for these weaknesses, a more realistic standard, 'normative decision

³ Paul, *Transformative Experience*; Havi Carel, Ian James Kidd, and Richard Pettigrew 'Illness as Transformative Experience', *The Lancet* 388/10050 (2016), 1152-1153.

⁴ Paul Weirich, *Realistic Decision Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press 2004), p.3.

theory', permits agents to select the best option from those on offer given their current knowledge and for this to fit with accepted norms of rationality in spite of our epistemic limitations as regular agents in the real world.⁵

These are not especially stringent guidelines and when making major life decisions we generally follow something like the following process in order to make decisions that meet these looser criteria of rationality, but also decisions that feel authentic by virtue of reflecting our subjective feelings about the world:

you, as the agent, review your options and do a kind of cognitive modeling from the subjective perspective. You imaginatively project different possible futures for yourself, futures that stem from different possible choices you could make. When you are considering your options, roughly, you evaluate each option by mentally modeling what the outcome would be like, should you decide to choose that option. When you assess each outcome, you assign it a subjective value, and then you compare all the different values when you make your choice.⁶

For many major life choices, Paul contends that a key component of assigning values to possible outcomes in the above way lies in an agent's assessment of the projected first-person subjective character of them. It is only through being able to assess this subjective character that we can meet norms of rationality by fully understanding the

⁵ Paul, *Transformative Experience*. Why would rationality be a desirable facet of the decision to run for political office, or indeed any major life decision that one would be expected to make rationally? The normative decision model allows the individual making the decision to choose the outcome that they actually want, to the best of their knowledge. If they follow the procedure above, they will make a decision that is consistent with their preferences as they see them. This has the virtue of ensuring that agents will pick the option that is most likely to result in the outcome that they want and should help them avoid those that they do not.

⁶ Paul, 'Précis of *Transformative Experience*', p.762.

nature of the potential outcome, and meet norms of authenticity by grasping their value from a first-personal perspective.⁷

However, if an agent is making a decision where the outcome of the decision involves assigning a utility function to an experience that they do not already have experience of, they will not be in a position to assign subjective value to it. As Paul puts it, 'there's a dimension of the subjective value that can only be grasped by having the right sort of experience'.⁸ This absence of experience, therefore, stands in the way of both rationally and authentically assessing it. On her view, these kinds of experiences can be considered *epistemically transformative*, introducing the agent to entirely new knowledge of the subjective value of the experience that they would not have had without undergoing the experience itself. Of course, such a definition might include many everyday occurrences, such as trying a new kind of chocolate bar or a different brand of laundry detergent, but these are examples of choices where we are, justifiably, mostly unconcerned by the level of uncertainty we face. Conversely, with the sorts of major life decisions that Paul discusses, we are.

The second obstacle to making a rational and authentic decision concerns the possibility that an agent's preferences will shift as a result of undergoing the experience addressed by the decision, reflecting its *personally transformative* nature. When projecting forward and imagining possible decision outcomes, we do so in line with our subjective preferences at the time that we are making our choice. As such, a rational decision is one that maximizes individual utility in accordance with these preferences. However, Paul argues that in personally transformative cases, we cannot be sure that these core preferences will not be changed by undergoing the transformative experience itself. This may shift the agent's core preferences away from what they were at the time of making the decision. Consequently, they may assign different utility to the outcome having experienced it and, given that these

⁷ L.A. Paul 'Transformative Choice: Discussion and Replies', *Res Philosophica*, 92/2 (2015), 473-545, pp.498-9.

⁸ Paul 'Transformative Choice: Discussion and Replies', p.498.

future preferences are inaccessible when choosing, they therefore cannot rely on their utility assignments at the point of decision-making. For example, the experience of having a child, or changing career, may change what it means to be me in such a way that any utilities I assign to the projected outcome based on my preferences prior to experiencing it may no longer hold after I have undergone it.⁹

Combined, epistemically and personally transformative experiences leave agents in a situation where the only way to maintain rationality in their approach is to eliminate such first-personal concerns, something that in turn undermines the authenticity of their decision. As Elizabeth Barnes puts it,

When deciding whether to do something, we need to assess how good the outcome will be for us. But Paul argues that in many such cases, we simply don't have enough information to do this... We can't decide how to assign values to possible outcomes (undergoing the experience or failing to undergo the experience) because we don't have a complete picture of what those values really are.¹⁰

My claim is that political life contains many experiences that are like this and that are therefore transformative in nature. A notable example, and my initial focus in this paper, is that of holding political office. Although the process by which each individual decides to run for, and holds, political office differs (something I discuss

⁹ The decision remains impervious to various forms of information updating - the point here is not that some information is missing and this results in uncertainty on the part of the agent, but rather that the information necessary to make the decision rationally is simply unavailable until the experience has been undergone. It does not exist at the time of choosing.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Barnes, 'What You Can Expect When You Don't Want to Be Expecting' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XCI/3 (2015), 775-786, p.775. The point here is that not only are we unable to assign the values accurately but that we cannot accurately represent the possible values in the first place.

further below), I argue that there is enough commonality to consistently make it a transformative experience to some degree. Holding political office provides individuals with knowledge that they would otherwise be unable to access and changes their personal core preferences. In this section, I begin with the strong version of my argument and focus on holding high-level executive office, such as becoming the President or Prime Minister, before demonstrating that my argument applies as a matter of degree to other cases of political office holding.¹¹

II. The strong argument - becoming the President

Being the President is a unique job. You are arguably the most powerful individual in the world. This is pretty stressful. As John F. Kennedy said ‘there is no experience you can get that can possibly prepare you adequately for the Presidency’.¹² Although you may previously have been a US Senator, and before that a local councilman, this is a whole new ball game. The epistemic revelation involved with being the President will likely affect not only your preferences in terms of policy content and similar other-regarding issues, but also fundamentally change what it means to be you by shifting your self-defining preferences, those relating to how you see yourself and those things in life that you value. Commenting on Barack Obama’s first term as US President, Richard Wolffe writes;

¹¹ I assume the candidate wants to win (i.e. they are not standing as a paper candidate or standing solely to gain the experience of running), and that they feel they have a good chance of winning. This allows me to focus on the subjective assessments that would dominate the decision-making process in such a case. I am therefore focusing primarily on how holding office is transformative as opposed to simply running for office. This is not to say that simply running for office without winning, and therefore holding it, isn’t transformative, as I think it is to a point. Rather, for the purposes of this paper, it is simpler to consider the ‘thicker’ version of this transformative experience offered by both running for and holding office.

¹² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1971), p.674.

When you witness how quickly presidents age in office, it is hard to believe they can pass through the Oval Office unchanged...Perhaps a president's core principles survive even as he shifts his positions on policies. But even Obama's closest aides conceded there were changes.¹³

As Commander in Chief, you now exist inside a bubble, escorted by your own private army, members of whom are willing to risk their lives to save the lives of you or your family. The Secret Service decide where you can go, what you can eat, and who can meet. You live in a fully-staffed mansion that tourists flock to visit, and occasionally people will jump over the surrounding fence in a bid to get closer to you, often in an attempt to cause you harm. There are around 50 people employed by international news organizations to monitor your every move, reporting their discoveries to millions of people who are also interested in all that you do. It might be lonely. Donald Trump, since moving to the White House without his wife and young son who continued living in their previous residence, spends his evenings alone watching television, using Twitter, or exploring 'the unfamiliar surroundings of his new home'.¹⁴ Jodi Kantor, discussing the process endured by the Obama family as they moved into the White House, writes, 'they were supposedly in charge, but they had surprisingly little control over the world around them'.¹⁵

A second kind of preference change will see you alter your other-regarding preferences as a result of the epistemic revelations that come with being the President. This might involve changes in your position on certain policy issues, or more crucially, your approach to thinking about politics as a whole. You can't know that the preferences you held before you became President will remain once you are actually

¹³ Richard Wolffe, *Revival: The Struggle for Survival Inside the Obama White House* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011), p.4.

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/05/us/politics/trump-white-house-aides-strategy.html> [accessed 02-06-2017].

¹⁵ Jodi Kantor, *The Obamas: A True Story* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.44.

in office. This would most likely be the case for any executive-level political office. As former British Prime Minister Tony Blair writes;

Anyone who has ever run a campaign to win an election knows how big a task it is. There are a million decisions of organisation, communication, personnel and policy which have to be taken quickly and effectively. If you can do it well, it is good preparation and a real indication of leadership, *but it isn't the same in its impact on you as a person*. From the moment the mantle is on your shoulders as prime minister, you understand that the scale, importance and complexity are completely different.¹⁶

As President, you make decisions that shape the lives of people around the globe. These decisions range from life-or-death choices to intervene militarily in troubled countries to decisions to fund lifesaving drugs for sufferers of terrible illnesses. You can even decide to grant clemency to those who have been incarcerated. You will learn an awful lot about making decisions under pressure. You will have the subjective experience of knowing many things that most people do not. Presidents have knowledge of national security, threats from terrorist groups, and other processes that tend to go on outside of the realm of the lives of most people. It is common to see this kind of privileged information utilized as a post-hoc justification for prior actions. For example, in November 2014, the Senate Intelligence Committee published their report into the interrogations of terrorism suspects undertaken by the CIA in the wake of 9/11. The report was extremely critical of the CIA's actions, and the administration of President George W. Bush was roundly criticized in the media following the report. However, a surprise defense of Bush came from his successor, President Barack Obama, who said 'Nobody can fully understand what it was like to be responsible for the safety and security of the American people in the aftermath of the worst attack on our national soil'.¹⁷ He highlights the epistemically unique position held by the

¹⁶ Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Random House, 2010), p.11, emphasis added.

¹⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/10/white-house-cia-torture-report> [last accessed 03-14-2017].

President – no-one knows what it was like to be him at that time. This is demonstrative of how many leaders who were critical of various aspects of defence policies prior to their taking executive office often shift to an epistemically-justified mode of *realpolitik* following their election.

Reflecting the unique epistemic nature of the role, former Presidents generally ‘refuse to criticize their successors on the grounds that presidents act on information – and bear responsibilities – that outsiders can’t fathom’.¹⁸ In summary, it seems clear – you cannot really know what it is like to be the President until you are actually the President. As former President George H.W. Bush put it;

We all understand the magnitude of the job when we decide to run for President. At least we think we do. But it’s not possible to fully appreciate the responsibility that comes with being President until you get that first briefing.¹⁹

III. The transformative nature of other political offices

The case of becoming the President or Prime Minister embodies the strong version of my argument, but a version of the argument can be applied to holding other political offices as a matter of degree. The epistemic transformation of being a politician at any level will bring about changes to both self-defining and other-regarding preferences.

Running for election and becoming a politician for the first time, at any level, is going to introduce you to knowledge of various kinds that was previously unknown – it will be epistemically transformative.²⁰ When running, you will likely face a level of media

¹⁸ Nancy Duffy and Michael Gibbs, *The Presidents Club: Inside the World’s Most Exclusive Fraternity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p.9.

¹⁹ Duffy and Gibbs, *The Presidents Club*, p.8.

²⁰ As noted, I think that my argument applies to all levels of election and office, from local to regional or state to national, although I do accept that certain types of office are going to change candidates in more or less intense ways. I also think that the argument applies to individuals moving from one political office to another.

scrutiny you have never experienced before. Even if this is just at the local or state level, as opposed to the national level or beyond, it will still be new. You will encounter members of your community, or the communities from which you are seeking votes, whom you may never usually meet in your daily life. Indeed, you will also encounter those individuals you do already know in a different way. This 'can involve holding oneself up before neighbors and community members'.²¹ If the constituency in which you are running is geographically large, you may spend more time travelling than usual, likely seeing less of your family or friends. If the status of the office you are running for is sufficiently high, you may have had to leave your previous job for the duration of the campaign, perhaps even permanently. All of these substantial new experiences will occur before a single vote is cast.

If you are successful, and win election to the legislature in question, the new experiences will continue to accumulate. You are likely to be working extremely long hours in a strange environment, often steeped in history, and under a level of scrutiny you are unaccustomed to.²² A newly-appointed Member of the British House of Lords

However, I will broadly focus my discussion on the example of someone entering national-level politics for the first time (for example, as a Member of Congress in the United States or as a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom).

²¹ Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, *It Still Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.137.

²² I accept that these environments are likely to be stranger to some individuals than others, dependent on their sex, race, or socio-economic background. However, my argument still holds, in that although some individuals may find the environments, and associated experiences, less alien, they specifically are still phenomenally new to them. As Matt Korris, *A Year in the Life: from member of public to Member of Parliament* (London: Hansard Society, 2011) p.2, discussing the case of new entrants to the British House of Commons, notes 'Entering Parliament as a new MP is a daunting experience. Exhausted from months of campaigning, they are faced with a huge and multifaceted job for which no job description exists. New MPs need to master the traditions and procedural complexities of the Commons, set up their offices, hire staff, find personal

remarked, 'I have been welcomed and many [other Members], especially women, have said that they will answer any questions, give me any help I need. But I'm into the Rumsfeld territory of unknown unknowns. How do I know what I need until I've already made that mistake?'.²³ Legislatures famously sit at strange times, something that might be alien to you if you have come from a 9-5 environment. If the position is a part-time one, you are likely now working a few evenings each week. If your constituency and the legislature are not geographically close, you may have to adopt lengthy and regular commutes between the two, especially if you want to retain the position beyond your first term. If you are in a national legislature, you may now have a say in life or death issues regarding people you don't know and will never meet, like going to war or funding healthcare treatments. Much of the detail of this will be unknown until confronted. Jane Roberts recounts an interview with a former British MP and government minister who, describing their changing feelings about the job, said that 'what had once seemed so glamorous didn't feel quite so glamorous anymore'.²⁴

Undergoing the lifestyle shifts identified above are almost certain to result in a shift in the type of person you are, and be personally transformative. There are further reasons to believe that there is something personally transformative about holding political office. One example is the way in which former members of many legislatures form societies whose membership is limited to individuals who were formerly elected to the institution in question. There is a sense that unless you have done these things, you cannot know what it is like and that there exists a privileged kinship among those who have. Roberts reports one MP who had 'attended a gathering of former

accommodation and re-arrange family life – and that is all before they can properly begin working as a legislator and constituency representative'.

²³ <https://jennyjones.greenparty.org.uk/news/2014/09/03/what-ive-learned-in-my-first-year-in-the-house-of-lords> [last accessed 03-14-2017].

²⁴ Jane Roberts, *Losing Political Office* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p.84.

MPs...liken[ing] the experience of colleagues' losing a parliamentary seat to, "a form of bereavement as though they'd been killed in battle".²⁵

On a broader level, intrinsic to all elected political positions is a built-in requirement that you face your constituents at the ballot box on a regular basis, something true of a tiny number of occupations. This binds all elected political offices are bound in an intrinsic sense. In holding them, you stand differently in relation to those who do not hold political office, and this sets you apart from them, no matter the scale or size or power of the office. Roberts quotes the partner of a former politician who note that, while her spouse held office, 'people don't talk to you properly. They only see the office, they don't see you and they certainly didn't see me. They never saw me'.²⁶ Overall, I argue that holding political office not only provides knowledge unavailable from other sources, but that doing these things may change what it means to be you. It may reshape your preferences and alter the value you place on certain aspects of your life. It can make you, for all intents and purposes, a different person to the person you were before.

IV. Objections to the argument

I will consider three notable objections to my argument prior to identifying a method of reframing the decision to run for political office in such a way that meets the normative criteria of rational decision-making outlined above.²⁷

²⁵ *ibid*, p.83.

²⁶ *ibid*, p.168.

²⁷ Others have highlighted a range of potential adjustments to Paul's arguments of varying complexity. I do not have the space to do these justice, and attempting to do so would dilute the discussion of the particularly political implications of it. As such, her contentions are somewhat taken on face value barring these obvious objections. I direct readers to the special issue of *Res Philosophica* (92/2, 2015) that carried a full symposium on *Transformative Experience* for more technical discussion.

First, it could be argued that testimony in sufficient detail might provide an agent with enough information to make a rational decision regarding whether to run for office. Assume that you are allowed to shadow a sitting Congresswoman for a number of years before you make your decision. You follow her during her work in Congress, you live in her house, and you travel with her wherever she goes. You know as much as there is to know about being a member of Congress. However, you crucially do not know what it would be like to be *you* as a member of Congress. For low-stakes decisions, testimony from a reliable source might justify making a certain choice. However, when it comes to high-stakes decisions, like whether or not to run for public office, it is less clear that even testimony from a highly-trusted source, like a sibling or parent, would offer sufficient justification for our choice.

A further objection is that it could be possible for an agent to ascertain the necessary subjective knowledge from similar occupations or activities. The thought here would be that there are certain other activities that would give an agent an idea of what it would be like to hold political office if they share some 'higher order phenomenological characteristics' with it.²⁸ To identify these, an agent would have to extrapolate these higher order facets from existing testimony of what it actually entails to be a politician.²⁹ This might be something like coarse-grained data listing certain activities undertaken by politicians, which the agent can then to rate in terms of whether they have experienced them at all and, if they have, the subjective value they previously assigned to them.

Alternatively, an agent could utilize finer-grained research on psychological models of politician performance and composition to compare their own mental

²⁸ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p.104.

²⁹ See Joshua B. Tanenbaum, Charles Kemp, Thomas L. Griffiths and Noah D. Goodman, 'How to Grow a Mind: Statistics, Structure, and Abstraction' *Science* 331 (2011), 1279-1285.

characteristics against those of politicians.³⁰ Based on this information, the agent could assess whether they seem like the type of person who would be able to achieve their political goals if they did run for office. However, whether this kind of approach is either possible, practical, or would really capture what it sets out to is debatable as it brings the authenticity of the decision into question. Additionally, both solutions suffer from the problem of fundamental identification. Regardless of the normative desirability of making a major life choice based on the often fuzzy findings of social science, neither alternative circumvents the fact that an agent cannot know what it will be like for *them* to undergo the experience, or the way that *they* will react to it, without actually doing it themselves. The point here is not to make a broad statement as to the physical (or otherwise) nature of the world, but to acknowledge that this is the situation we are actually in as regular decision-makers in the world. Should science advance to the point that an experience machine of some kind is invented, this may change but, to the best of my knowledge, no such machine currently exists.

As noted towards the beginning of the paper, a third objection might be that intense commitment to a set of political beliefs is sufficient to remove the first-personal element of the decision to run for office, therefore making the transformative nature of holding office irrelevant and allowing a rational decision to be made in conjunction with the framework laid out above. In such a case, the decision would be based entirely on the commitment to the representation of a given set political beliefs in the legislature in question. The only thing that would matter here would be the agent's subjective credences regarding the likelihood of this actually happening. The outcome

³⁰ See, for example, research by Jo Silvester, Madeleine Wyatt and Ray Randall, 'Politician personality, Machiavellianism, and political skill as predictors of performance ratings in political roles' *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 87/2 (2014), 258-279, or other recent research that looks at the personality types of politicians and breaks these down by behavior or preference, such as Bryce J. Dietrich, Scott Lasley, Jeffrey J. Mondak, Megan L. Rempel, and Joel Turner, 'Personality and Legislative Politics: The Big Five Trait Dimensions Among U.S. State Legislators' *Political Psychology* 33/2 (2012), 195-210.

would be considered objectively valuable, and therefore it would not require subjective deliberation. I find it hard to believe, however, that many individuals would not undertake a notable amount subjective deliberation regarding the decision to run for office. As Paul writes, 'as individuals...making decisions about our futures, we don't just want to know what others tell us about the probabilities or values of outcomes, or compute the outcome independently of our own personal inclinations about the subjective values of the outcomes'.³¹ Similarly, as I discuss below, almost any decision to run will involve consideration of the outcome will affect their marriage, friends, or family. It seems unlikely that these concerns would be outweighed by third-personal issues.³²

One exception to this that Paul notes is that this might change when 'the lives of others' are at stake.³³ It is likely that some individuals choose to run for office based on a belief that they are doing so to actively save the lives of others, albeit in an indirect way. I concede that if the decision to act in such a way that you could save a life needed to be made immediately, and that you would directly act to save the life (for example, perhaps a situation that required an immediate decision between two choices - one that resulted in activity that saved a life or another that resulted in inactivity that did not), your consideration of the phenomenal experience of saving a life would likely not factor much in the decision.

I cannot see that running for political office in order to save lives functions in this way. Politicians influence societies in multiple ways, but it is almost always indirect - through public policy initiatives, assignment of public money, or indeed in abstract

³¹ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p.86. I accept that there may be exceptions to this in extreme cases, but in free representative democracies that hold elections to fill political positions, this is unlikely to occur.

³² An interesting outcome of this argument is that decision to run for political office could only be made rationally if the decision was entirely selfless, not at all focused on the first- person outcomes of doing so.

³³ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p.86.

ways such as providing symbolic leadership. The decision to run would not rely solely on the immediate reaction required in the example above. As a result, I claim that the subjective values of the outcomes of the choice are likely to weigh more heavily. Additionally, the agent in the above example could walk away after she has made her choice. She is not necessarily under any legal, constitutional, or other temporally extensive obligations as a result of the choice. Politicians, for the most part, are. If they choose to run for office to save lives, they do so in the knowledge that there is additional baggage that comes with the choice.³⁴

Finally, it is clear that the kind and level of uncertainty facing an agent is a matter of degree. An agent can build up various kinds of relevant knowledge about politics, political institutions, and so on, that may ultimately make undergoing the transformative experience less surprising in certain senses. However, the underlying issue remains: there is a fundamental ambiguity that exists regarding expectations around subjective knowledge which means that, in the end, agents are always required to take something of a leap of faith.

V. Implications of the argument

The first implication of my argument is that the traditional approach to making the decision to run for political office does not allow for it to be made in a rational and authentic way. Prominent work on political ambition applies something akin to the normative rational decision model in the sense that it is (implicitly) suggested that

³⁴ I note the possible case of individuals who feel they are called to public office by God. Although it may seem that this would be a clear-cut case of third-personal concerns outweighing first-personal concerns, I would argue that a large part of the subjective assignment of values to the outcomes may be how it feels for you to be carrying out the work of God, as opposed to simply the abstract doing of that work. This would also apply to undertaking actions in the name of 'duty', a nation, and so on.

prospective candidates operate under a principle of subjective utility maximization.³⁵ There is an acknowledgement, albeit a tacit one, that the phenomenal element of what it would be like for that person to run for, and hold, office is a crucial element of the decision to run; perhaps even the crucial element. For example, Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox describe how one previously reluctant politician 'transformed from someone who had never conceived of herself as a candidate to someone who enthusiastically embraced the role'.³⁶ Similarly, they acknowledge that 'most first-time candidates are moving into uncharted waters and are often unsure of what a candidacy would entail and whether they could endure it'.³⁷ An interviewee of Lawless and Fox also framed the decision to run in terms of what it would be like for him, posing questions to himself such as 'Could I do it? Would I be good at making speeches? Do I want to be in the public eye?'.³⁸ This formulation requires individuals to consider what it would be like to live their life if they made the decision to run, to project forward and consider what their lives would be like in a first-person way - considering the subjective character of running for, and holding, political office is crucial in the decision to run.³⁹

I imagine that many people feel that the decision they made to run for political office *was* rational, and they would recognize their own process in the traditional model of

³⁵ This is even if their preference is not assumed by default to be the satisfaction of inherent political ambition and that this is subject to their individual context and is not homogenous. My arguments apply to both parts of the two-stage model put forward by Lawless and Fox - nascent and expressive ambition.

³⁶ Lawless and Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate*, p.136, emphasis added.

³⁷ *ibid*, p.137.

³⁸ *ibid*, p.137.

³⁹ Similar scenarios are put forward by Linda L. Fowler and Robert D. McClure, *Political Ambition: Who Decides to Run for Congress* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Thomas A. Kazee (ed), *Who Runs for Congress? Ambition, Context, and Candidate Emergence* (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1994); Ronald Keith Gaddie, *Born to Run: Origins of the Political Career* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

decision-making outlined above. Despite this, if they made their decision by projecting forward and imagining the possible outcomes of either running or not running, the argument of transformative experience suggests that decision cannot be justified as a rational one. As such, they are presumably basing their projected subjective values of being a politician on ultimately unfounded assumptions, such as that they would perform well in the role. Reflecting on this, the undermining of the traditional model in this way has a potentially liberating effect. Some people may think that they are not the right sort of person to make it in politics, that they do not have the correct experience, or that they lack sufficient political knowledge or acumen to perform the job well. However, I argue that whatever their method, those decisions ultimately do not stand to reason. If individuals who had come to this conclusion were to reconsider it in this light, they may think differently and decide to run.

Taking all of the above into account, how should someone who is interested in running for political office behave if they wish to make their decision in a rational way? The simplest option is to somehow make the decision entirely in third-personal terms, as discussed. However, as has been argued, I think this is essentially not possible, and would not be a satisfactory solution for most people in any case. A more acceptable approach suggested by Paul is to consider the choice as between embracing the unknown and not – to choose to seek out new experiences for the sake of the potential inherent benefits that come from undertaking them. This avoids the issue of utility or value assignment to the specific outcomes of the decision. Rather, the utility assignment is for new experiences versus not-new experiences, a broad category that actually can have a utility assigned to it, albeit a fuzzy one. In the case of prospective political candidates, this could be framed as the choice between deepening their involvement in formal democratic politics or not. This does not alter the fact that their core preferences may change, but it does entail an acceptance of this potential change.

Framing the decision in this way opens up the possibility for individuals who are simply interested in new experience to be able to run for office in a normatively rational way and embrace the experience without necessarily having pondered the decision for a long time, or undertaken activities that they felt might prepare them for

political office, such as working for a political party. In effect, it acts a formalizing method for dismantling many of the *de facto* qualifications that have come to be seen as prerequisites of running for political office, prerequisites that arguably unnecessarily and prematurely limit the pool of potential candidates. Most importantly, it would devalue such qualifications as the expectation that they would be robust to the transformative experience itself is necessarily speculative.

The second area of interest is the implications of this argument for the relationship between voters and candidates or elected representatives. On my account, the core preferences of a representative after their election will ultimately be unknown to them prior to their election. That is, if t_1 is prior to their election, for example during the campaign, and t_2 is a point following their election whilst they hold political office, the candidate at t_1 will be unable to know that their self-defining and other-regarding preferences at t_2 will be the same as they currently are. Of course, they might well turn out to be, but this cannot be known for certain at t_1 . This brings key tenets underlying many models of political representation into question.

Although recent decades have seen the development of various more complex ideal-type models of political representation, a constant feature of those that focus on the representative relationship forged through the ballot box is that candidates appeal to potential voters on the basis of how they will behave if elected.⁴⁰ These promises might be policy-focused ('I will not raise university tuition fees') or they might be behavior-focused ('I will conduct myself in manner x in the course of my work as your representative'). Importantly, the promise might even be to ignore voters' preferences

⁴⁰ Jane Mansbridge, 'Rethinking Representation' *American Political Science Review* 97/4(2003): 515-528; Jane Mansbridge, 'A "Selection Model" of Political Representation' *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17/4 (2009): 369-398; Andrew Rehfeld, 'Representation Rethought: On Trustees, Delegates, and Gyroscopes in the Study of Political Representation and Democracy' *American Political Science Review* 103/2 (2009): 214-230; Andrew Rehfeld, 'The Concepts of Representation' *American Political Science Review* 105/3 (2011): 631-641.

regarding either the policies they should pursue or the way they should behave, a kind of classic trustee approach.⁴¹ In each case, however, for a candidate to win election, we assume that there must be at least some kind of congruence in opinion in some way between her and those who voted her into office. Jane Mansbridge notes that despite the complex array of theoretical models of representation that move beyond a simple trustee-delegate distinction, none are able to fully shake free of ‘the criterion of constituent-representative congruence’.⁴² The specifics of theoretical models of representation are not the focus here – rather, the point is that *any* principles or guiding approach is not guaranteed to make it through the transformative experience intact.⁴³ As such, we should view any promises of this kind with this caveat in mind.

I do not wish to be too prescriptive here, as the key point is that you can’t know how the transformative experience will affect you, and with what intensity. However, we can draw on the extensive existing literature on political leadership to help structure our thinking about how undergoing the transformative experience might affect individual politicians, and with what intensity. For example, we should expect

⁴¹ The legislator may even ignore their own changing preferences and stick to those they stated whilst campaigning, even if this might feel strange for them. The normative desirability of such an undertaking also highlights the implications of transformative choices for the tension between responsive and so-called responsible government.

⁴² Mansbridge, ‘Rethinking Representation’, p.526. Rehfeld, ‘Representation Rethought’, notes that congruence is not the be-all and end-all of political representation, and he is correct. However, it is still clearly an idea that has purchase in the practice of political life and thus presumably affects actually-occurring political decision-making.

⁴³ Indeed, based on Paul’s overall argument, we would expect this to swing both ways, and for voters to be undergoing transformative experiences of their own on a regular basis. The extent to which these would affect their political preferences is debatable, but it is relatively inarguable that changes would occur.

variations in the intensity of political events to affect the nature of the transformative experience for the individual in question.⁴⁴ Leaders occupying high office during especially turbulent times might see their self-defining and other-regarding preferences undergo a more marked transformation than leaders who hold office during relatively uneventful periods. Similarly, the type of events that occur during a leader's tenure might also affect any transformations – there is likely to be a subjective difference between reacting to a calamitous economic event as opposed to a violent terrorist attack.

The nature and intensity of any transformation may also depend on the characteristics of the individual in question. Margaret Hermann has discussed how differences in beliefs, leadership style, and motivation between leaders might be expected to affect their conduct in office.⁴⁵ Based on this, we can adopt her framework when considering how leaders might react to the transformative experience of holding office. Politicians might have their beliefs about the nature of politics, the public, or specific policy issues transformed. In turn, their leadership style, and interactions with staff and advisors, might shift. Their motivations for holding office may also change, with a sense of fulfilment or an increase in desire being the most likely common transformations. Crucially, their starting point in all of these areas might have an effect on the nature of the transformative experience they undergo.

This will ultimately influence the extent to which the politician in question may find the transformative experience either positive or negative. Donald Trump, for example, given his unique personality traits and apparently unusual motivation for seeking high office, might find the constraints and pressures of the Presidency transformative

⁴⁴ Jerrold M. Post, 'Personality Profiling Analysis', 328-346 in R.A.W. Rhodes and Paul 't Hart (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.329-330.

⁴⁵ Margaret Hermann, 'Political Psychology', 117-131 in R.A.W. Rhodes and Paul 't Hart (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.120-123.

in a limiting and negative way. In contrast, former Vice President Joseph Biden seems to have found his experience of high office transformative in a redemptive and life-affirming way.

Ultimately, you cannot know for sure in advance how you will be transformed, and these are merely broad speculations as to the possible space of outcomes. However, I claim that the not knowing, the fundamental ambiguity here, does raise questions about the ways in which our representatives can be expected to act, specifically the expectations of the electors as to their likely behaviour once in office as well as their own presentation of what they will be like if they hold it. I appreciate that the relative importance of this expectation depends on specifics such as whether the candidate is an incumbent, how explicit and detailed their promises regarding their future behaviour are, and so on, but it does raise questions nonetheless.

VI. Extending the argument

I will now briefly consider ways in which I think the arguments applied above to the case of running for political office could be extended to include other areas of political science, namely the questions of voting, decision-making about transformative public policy, and the nature of collective decision-making in transformative cases.

My first claim is that voting, in many ways, violates the normative decision model in similar ways to the decision to run for office and constitutes a transformative experience. In his book *How Voters Feel*, Stephen Coleman argues that voting needs to be reconsidered by political science so as to acknowledge that 'the act of voting is not simply a statement of what people want, but a performance of who the people are'.⁴⁶ In other words, thinking beyond voting as an expression of desires in a third-person sense, there is an affective aspect of voting that allows voters to constitute themselves through the process. For Coleman, the phenomenal character of voting is crucial. He highlights the fact that;

⁴⁶ Stephen Coleman, *How Voters Feel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.viii.

Political scientists have paid scant attention to whether the experience of democracy is joyful or sombre, satisfying or frustrating, dignifying or shaming, or simply emotionally numbing.⁴⁷

Drawing attention to the first-person phenomenal elements of voting, and the outcome of voting (perhaps of participation in a broader sense), bring into focus the personal nature of the choices that individuals make as part of the democratic process. This notion is supported by further research demonstrating the various ways in which voting is a socially embedded and relational activity that acts as an identity-building endeavour.⁴⁸ Building on this existing work, introducing the idea that voting can sometimes be a transformative experience further problematizes the simplistic assumption that voters are savvy and rational consumers in the political marketplace.

Instead, in the act of voting are bound numerous epistemic and personal transformations. Coleman describes voting in terms that underline this potentially transformative nature it holds, noting the possibility that 'the experience of having voted leaves people feeling that they - or the world around them - is somehow different'.⁴⁹ Combined, these ideas sum to characterize voting as a transformative experience. First, voting for the first time, or voting for a different political party or candidate to usual, will provide you with knowledge about the world, and your relations with others, that you simply could not access without carrying out those acts.

Perhaps more importantly, though, voting can be seen as personally transformative - it can be seen to change what it means to be you, and could result in a shift in your

⁴⁷ Coleman, *How Voters Feel*, p.4.

⁴⁸ Edward Fieldhouse and David Cutts, 'Shared Partisanship, Household Norms and Turnout: Testing a Relational Theory of Electoral Participation' *British Journal of Political Science*, First View (2016): DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000089>.

⁴⁹ Coleman, *How Voters Feel*, p.8.

core preferences. You might not know how much you may or may not value the experience of voting in a given election, or for a given candidate and so on, until you have done it. Voting might be revelatory in a number of ways. In terms of enfranchisement, voting can signal belonging, allowing an individual to feel like a full citizen. Once established, it can have a social effect, allowing individuals to feel commonality with their friends or family, more so than they would do had they not voted. Finally, it could result in someone becoming enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by democratic participation, changing their core preferences regarding how they spend their time or engage with their local communities.⁵⁰ Indeed, the way that 'being an activist' has entered the lexicon of politically-involved individuals in recent years underscores the manner in which it is considered to be a part of one's identity, not simply an incidental activity undertaken from time to time.

Of course, when we participate in political life, we are making decisions together with others. Indeed, making decisions as a group is arguably the fundamental aim of politics as an activity and elections, referendums, or other kinds of vote generally have a binding effect of some kind on all citizens within the polity. In this sense, when we vote on particularly important issues that affect our future as both individuals and a group, we are deciding together whether to undergo a transformative experience. Eric Schliesser has termed these collective political transformative experiences – transformative experiences that are made by, and affect, both individuals and larger groups of individuals simultaneously.⁵¹ In these cases, we jointly make decisions about our shared future. An example of this might be the June 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. Schliesser remarks that 'Brexit' bears many of the epistemically and personally transformative hallmarks discussed above – the

⁵⁰ I believe that the argument applies to voting in all situations to an extent, but is more easily applied on particularly cases such as voting for the first time due to being enfranchised in some way, of switching vote choice (from either one party to another), and of deciding to either start or stop voting after a period of doing the opposite.

⁵¹ <http://dailynous.com/2016/06/28/philosophers-on-brexit/#Schliesser> [accessed 10/03/2016]

consequences of a vote to leave the EU were unforeseen to a large extent prior to the referendum taking place, it alters the collective identity of the country, and in turn may alter individuals' conceptions of their own identities. If, for example, I lay great emphasis on my identity as being the best of 'British values' prior to the referendum, drawing on some reasonably stable sense of collective identity that included membership of the EU in doing so, this lies in tatters following the vote. Brexit is just one of many cases where voters are faced with a collective transformative, another clear example being the referendum on Scottish independence. A further case might be that of the people of the United States choosing to elect Donald Trump as President, a man quite unlike all previous occupants of that position. The American people now find themselves in a position where their relationship to their leader, to their national identity, and to each other, is arguably transforming. In the opening week of the Trump presidency, large-scale protests spontaneously broke out at airports in response to an Executive Order on immigration policy. As the *New York Times* noted, the protests came 'out of nowhere'.⁵² Similarly, the day following Trump's inauguration saw an unprecedented number of protesters join the 'Women's March' in cities all over the U.S.⁵³ It might be that Trump becoming president alters how many Americans see themselves in relation to politics and political action in unanticipated ways, collectively transforming their self-defining and other-regarding preferences.

However, in addition to decisions with collective effects that are made by that collective, we can also identify transformative cases where individual executive political actors or smaller groups of politicians will take a decision the outcome of which is then imposed on the group, these being distinct from cases where voters collectively make a decision about all of their futures via a plebiscite of some kind. This might be in response to an unexpected event taking place or just part of the natural progression of political life. These cases will be not only personally

⁵² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/nyregion/jfk-protests-trump-refugee-ban.html> [accessed 01-31-2017]

⁵³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/women-march-protest-president-trump.html> [accessed 01-31-2017]

transformative for the leader or politicians in question – about what kind of leader they choose to become - but also for the polity in a collective sense – what kind of place will it become? Paul discusses making transformative choices on behalf of others using the example of parents taking responsibility for the decision of whether to move forward with cochlear implant surgery for their deaf child, and concludes that ‘shedding light on the transformative nature of the choice can allow us to cast doubt on how parents can be expected to rationally evaluate’ the relevant evidence.⁵⁴ If leading politicians often find themselves in an analogous situation where they need to make a choice on the behalf of many others, acknowledging that many such major policy choices are transformative in nature raises similar questions about how politicians are to decide in these cases.

Existing accounts of political leaders’ decision-making processes have identified various limitations that they work within while making policy decisions.⁵⁵ Irving Janis, in his ‘constraints model of policymaking processes’, highlights three core constraints - egocentric constraints like self-serving motives or ability to cope with stress, affiliative constraints encompassing either the presence or absence of social support, and cognitive constraints involving limitations of time, expertise, and resources.⁵⁶ Janis argues that these factors ‘influence the way policy decisions actually are made’, act as sources of error, and should be guarded against by adopting what he calls a ‘vigilant problem solving’ approach.⁵⁷ This approach is similar to the normative rational model described at the outset of the paper, requiring the decision-

⁵⁴ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, pp.56-70.

⁵⁵ Irving L. Janis, *Crucial Decisions: Leadership in Policymaking and Crisis Management* (New York: The Free Press, 1989). Of course, such accounts assume that actors actively want to make policy in a systematic way. This might not always be true, something that represents a major constraint on the process itself.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.16.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, Chapter 5.

maker to 'engage in arduous mental activity in order to formulate the problem in a comprehensive way' and to 'contemplate all the crucial things that could go wrong'.⁵⁸

In addition to the above constraints that leaders face when trying to adopt this vigilant approach, cases of epistemic and personal transformation add a further constraint to the list. In such cases, the problem leaders face is not that their decision-making processes are defective and therefore either neither identifying nor correctly assigning utility to possible solutions, but rather that such accurate identification and utility assignment is impossible by definition.⁵⁹ Leaders regularly confront such cases. Decisions about climate change policy, for example, see them presented with options of action and inaction that both meet the criteria of transformative experience. Similarly, the decision facing members of the UK Parliament regarding withdrawal from the EU sees a small group of political leaders facing a personally transformative experience but also potentially imposing a collectively transformative experience on the British people, especially on certain sections of the population who might be particularly affected by the details of Brexit. This could potentially include longtime non-British residents losing their right to remain in the country and being forced to leave their jobs, homes, and neighbourhoods.⁶⁰ When making moves in these areas, not only will leaders open themselves up to personal and epistemic transformation, their decision has the same effect on the polity at large.⁶¹

A further influence on the likelihood that leaders will push ahead with transformative public policy decisions is the political context in which they are made. A feeling of positive momentum, for example, might make them more open to embracing the

⁵⁸ *ibid*, pp.93-4.

⁵⁹ Again, unless by chance.

⁶⁰ Trump's Executive Order regarding immigration could be seen in a similar light.

⁶¹ The specifics of the personal transformation will be different for the politicians in question as they may also feel the effects of having been one of the people who made the decision, not just the effects of it having been taken in a more general sense.

uncertainty offered by transformative decisions than its negative counterpart.⁶² Indeed, considerations based on time, such as position in the electoral cycle, economic projections, and shifts in public opinion, will likely affect the chance that a leader even allows such issues to occupy their mind. As Paul 't Hart writes, 'leaders' fates are determined to a significant extent by their placement in what has been called political time...the ebb and flow of regimes: sets of basic values, ideas and policy propensities around which the polity and its governance are organized'.⁶³ Further, he notes that the level of commitment a leader has to the political regime that they find themselves in will also affect their decisions. Intuitively, this seems like it would be especially true of transformative decisions where leaders might 'have a fundamental choice to make: do they believe in, support, and therefore seek to perpetuate the paradigm of the day, or do they wish to see it replaced by an alternative set of ideas and arrangements?'⁶⁴ Does a leader embrace the unknown of transformation and 'drain the swamp' of established approaches to political practice, or do they play it safe? Clearly, their disposition towards the political regime will affect how comfortable they are with moving forward in spite of their own epistemic limitations in these cases.

VII. Choosing uncertainty

In this paper I have applied L.A. Paul's idea of transformative experience to political life, using multiple examples to demonstrate its relevance. I have discussed how individual political experiences, such as choosing to participate in political life by running for office or voting, can be transformative. In addition, I have outlined how many transformative experiences in political life take place collectively, sometimes decided by all members of a polity and sometimes only by a smaller groups of politicians. I am sure there are many more cases of transformative experience in political life that I do not identify here: consider the sheer number of political situations where an agent (or group of agents) faces a decision between two or more

⁶² Paul 't Hart, 'Reading the signs of the times: Regime dynamics and leadership possibilities' *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 19/4 (2011): 419-439.

⁶³ *ibid*, p.426.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.427.

outcomes, the utility of which relies primarily on the subjective experience of what it would be like for them to live with the outcome of such a decision, but where the knowledge of this is unavailable to the agent at the time they make the choice. Acknowledging the transformative nature of many experiences in political life means that as citizens deciding whether to run for office, as voters, or as political leaders, we will often have to choose uncertainty, explicitly acknowledging our epistemic weaknesses. Whether we find this liberating, terrifying, or somewhere in between will depend on our individual dispositions but either way, we will have to confront uncertainty. As Paul puts it,

when making these kinds of transformative decisions...you choose to become a certain type of person and to live your life a certain way, but you don't choose it because you know what it will be like - you choose it in order to discover who you'll become.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p.80.