DOI: 10.1111/issj.12363

ARTICLE

Are all politicians the same? Reproduction and change of chief executive career patterns in democratic regimes

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Abstract
The scholarship on political careers and recruitment has increasingly focused on the conditions that foster the emergence of new political elites. However, top politicians in democratic regimes often share socio-economic backgrounds and occupy similar political positions before entering office. Career patterns in politics are relatively stable and tend to reproduce themselves over time; this leads to the persistence of core background traits among the members of the political elite. The lack of profile renewal seems at odds with the claim of democratic theory, which asserts that democratic competition is open, inclusive, and expansive. Despite its relevance, the causal mechanisms behind career patterns' stability among political elites have received little systematic attention. This article contributes to fill the gap, by focusing on democratic chief executives. First, it clarifies the core concepts for the study of political elites and careers. Second, it proposes an understanding of the formation and stability of chief executives' career patterns as functions of path-dependent institutional effects. Third, the work uses this theory to investigate persistence and renewal of the background characteristics of all US presidents, from George Washington (1789) to Joe Biden (2021). The analysis contributes to the literature on elite stability, circulation, and renewal in democracy.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article is theoretical, although it provides empirical information in the guise of support to its argument. It starts with the observation that top executive politicians in democracies tend to follow

similar career patterns before entering their political office (Müller-Rommel et al. 2020). In particular, this work focuses on national chief executives[1] and claims that the study of their political career patterns can benefit from the integration of discussion about institutional resilience. The discussion has important implications for the democratic theory, in that it provides a framework to understand the conditions for stability and change of elite configurations as well as the structural opportunities to renew the profile of the members of the political elite. Attention is thus not paid to the mere turnover in office but rather to the *stability of individual background traits* among several office holders. The aim of the article is two-fold: first, to highlight a neglected perspective on the formation and reproduction of political career patterns among democratic political leaders based on path dependency theory, whereby career patterns are posited to be proxies of elite configurations; second, to apply the concepts and the theoretical considerations of the first parts to the specific case of US presidents between 1789 to 2021. Based on an original data collection, the empirical analysis shows how the suggested framework can work to identify long-term political processes of political elites' stability and resistance to change.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to stress that this article's arguments (as well as its illustrative empirics) are parts of a comprehensive framework for analysis, which does not aim to infer hypotheses to be tested in this context. Rather, it "provides a map of how things (inter)relate and leads to a set of research questions" (Bache and Flinders 2004, p. 33).[2]

It is common wisdom that political career patterns derive from the combination of politicians' personal ambition (Schlesinger 1966) and the career opportunities provided by factors such as the organisation of the state (centralised *versus* decentralised), the electoral system, and mechanisms of intra-party democracy. Depending on the institutional opportunity structures, politicians with specific socio-demographic and professional background are – all else equal – more likely to climb the career ladder (Borchert 2011; Vercesi 2018). In any political system, the composition of the political elite is a function of settled social structures (Best and Vogel 2014) and most politicians follow, on their way to the top, similar career trajectories. In a nutshell, regular career patterns tend to reproduce themselves and are thus stable over time. This article assumes that one can speak of stability when career trajectories are reproduced at least for one generational period, ranging between two and three decades.

Any substantial and general change of politicians' career backgrounds indicates that former political elites have been challenged and replaced by counter-elites or new elites, as well as that political actors with new professional profiles are entering the political system and, eventually, becoming the new established elite. The literature expects three main clusters of factors to explain the change of career patters: regime transition and constitutional reforms (e.g., Samuels and Shugart 2010; Semenova et al. 2013; Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018); emerging career opportunities in the market sector that create incentives to opt for alternative career choices (Musella 2015; Baturo and Mikhaylov 2016); changing societal conditions and disaffection with existing channels and practices of representation (Verzichelli 2018).

That said, relatively little attention has been paid to the explanation of the *absence* of change, although elite change is often posited to be a physiological necessity of any lively democracy. Based on configurational epistemological assumptions, this article assumes that the absence of change cannot be simply understood as the absence of the conditions for change. Rather, reproduction and stability of career patterns should be theorised on their own. The main research questions are: Why, over time, do several political leaders enter office with career backgrounds similar to those of their close predecessors? Why don't levels of personnel turnover in chief executive positions correlate with similarly high levels of variation in the career trajectories followed by the incumbents? Under what conditions do political elites' profiles remain the same over time? While the scholarship has extensively investigated the relationship between major societal changes, the emergence of new parliamentary classes, and ministerial turnover (Cotta and Best 2007; Dowding and Dumont 2015), hardly anything has been said about the stability (and renewal) of chief executives' career profiles around the globe.[3] This observation appears surprising if one thinks of the pivotal role that many world leaders play in democratic governance and the current global transformations of political leadership (Vogel et al. 2019).

Recent studies have focused on the rise of new populist leaders, such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, or Donald Trump in the United States (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Norris and Inglehart 2019), as well as on the establishment of personal parties, such as Macri's *Propuesta Republicana* or Macron's *En Marche* (Musella 2018). These emerging types of chief executives, with profiles of political and/or party outsiders, can be understood as signals of an ongoing process of elite renewal, after decades in which political leaders have been recruited among experienced politicians with similar socio-economic traits (Müller and Philipp 1991; Arana Araya 2016; Nyrup and Bramwell 2020). Against this background, it appears worth investigating what structural causal mechanisms make – irrespective of party affiliation or personalities – the selection of chief executives with similar career background likely, and what leads to (recurring) breaks in the stable reproduction of their recruitment patterns. In principle, democratic competition is inclusive, expansive, and should favour the constant entry of competitors with new profiles in the political game. In his classic study of the German social democratic party in the early twentieth century, Michels (1968) found an inclination of democratic organisations to generate oligarchies, due to their internal specialisation. However, later democratic theorists recognised that – albeit elitist – democracy fosters the pluralism of elites (Schumpeter 1942; Dahl 1971). Sartori (1987: 171), in turn, stressed that democracies should also – from a normative perspective – continuously promote the rise of new political leaders, provided that they are recruited according to "meritocratic" criteria. In light of these observations, the long-term lack of variation and persistence of chief executives' career patterns is at odds with the normative democratic claim of equality and inclusiveness and deserves further investigation for a better understanding of leadership recruitment.

For this purpose, this article proposes a framework that accounts for stability (and change) of democratic chief executives' career patterns as a function of path-dependent institutional effects. First, the study introduces the notions of political elite (which chief executives are part of), the relationship between political and other elites, as well as the concepts of political career and professionalisation. Building on these conceptual clarifications, the third section presents the core theoretical argument. Before discussing the insights and suggesting research outlooks, the article assesses the viability of the theoretical argument by means of the empirical observation of career pattern reproduction and periodical changes in the US presidency. This analysis provides clues about how one can interpret a political system's history as a sequence of periods defined by the stability of certain types of political careers, interrupted by the periodical change of the resulting career patterns.

2 | POLITICAL ELITES, ELITE STRUCTURES, AND PATHWAYS TO POWER

2.1 | Political elites

The study of political careers is the study of individuals' pathways to political power (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 2007). In democracy, political power tends to coincide with executive power, which is vested in the executive branch of the state and, in particular, in its head (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2020). Chief executives set the country's policy agenda and are easily recognisable public leaders (Helms 2005; Strangio et al. 2013). In this sense, chief executives are the (formal) top echelon of the country's political elite. Why should one expect that the backgrounds of political elite members differ from the backgrounds of the rest of the society? How are political elites different relative to other types of elites?

At the dawn of the modern study of elites, theorists of the "Italian School of Elitism" stated that all societies are made up of a minority of rulers (the elites) and a majority of ruled (Bobbio 1972), and that even democratic forms of organisation are conducive to oligarchical distributions of power due to functional specialisation (Michels 1968). For Pareto (1968), elites were successful people in a given social field with exceptional personal traits; for Mosca (1939), they were small groups of people,

whose influence in the society would be disproportionate because of their better internal organisation (while the society at large is unorganised). In the following decades, definitions of elites have been largely "fine-tuned". A well-known definition by Lasswell and Kaplan (1965: 201) states that the elite members are "those with most power in a group", while, for Etzioni-Halevy (1993: 9), elites are "wielders of power and influence on the basis of their control of resources".[4] Similarly, Hoffmann-Lange (2007: 910) argues that "elites are customarily defined by their influence on strategic […] decisions that shape the living conditions in a society".

By definition, an individual is a member of the political elite if she is directly and mostly active in politics *and* ranks among the most powerful actors in the group (see Higley et al. 1998: 2). Those members that, moreover, hold constitutionally recognised positions of public authority and have the monopoly of power to make binding decisions for the whole society (e.g., chief executives) constitute the apex of the political elite[5] (Hoffmann-Lange 2020, p. 501. See also Parry 2005). While in traditional societies, political and non-political elites are hardly distinguishable (Fukuyama 2011), in modern democracies elites are differentiated and there exists a functional division of labour between elites from different sectors of social life (Putnam 1976; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

In terms of career background, contemporary political elites in democracy tend to share strong commitment to politics, which make them undertake time-consuming careers within parties and political institutions (King 1981; von Beyme 1993; Borchert 2003). In this regard, democratic leaders are more politically experienced than autocrats, irrespective of their own country (Baturo and Elkink 2021). Among democracies, members of the top echelons of the political elites in parliamentary systems tend to be career politicians, characterised by narrow occupational background, narrow extra-political life experience, and strong ambition (Allen et al. 2020: 202. See also Mattozzi and Merlo 2008). However, scholars have also noticed that, since the 1990s, chief executives in both parliamentary and presidential countries have increasingly developed skills and policy expertise outside of politics. This might suggest a major shift in their recruitment patterns (Carreras 2017; Müller-Rommel et al. 2022).

2.2 | Elite homogeneity and circulation

Scholars have stressed that, to keep their privileged position, elites tend to endorse ingroup homogeneity of values and preferences about the organisation of the society. In this regard, a typical instrument of political elites to preserve their internal cohesion is the co-optation of their future members from a pool of individuals that s similar educational backgrounds, previous occupational experience, and forms of political socialisation (Bourdieu 1996; O'Rourke et al. 2015). Empirical research confirms this conjecture, by finding common educational background and shared social status among national democratic political elites (Bovens and Wille 2017).

Political elites whose members (or a particular portion of them) are similar in terms of educational and professional backgrounds (e.g., internally homogenous) are more likely to be diversified and autonomous *vis-à-vis* other elites (Engelstad 2018). External differentiation, indeed, refers to the degree of separateness between the political elite itself and other elites (e.g., economic, administrative, diplomatic, military, etc.). As Higley et al. (1998, p. 3) notice, "[e]lite differentiation […] has two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. Horizontally, it consists of the strong tendency of elites to become socially heterogeneous, organisationally diverse, and partly autonomous. Vertically, differentiation involves relative elite freedom from mass pressures and extra-national controls." Low levels of diversification between different types of elites, in contrast, are conducive to what Dogan (2003, p. 1–2) calls "elite cousinhood", that is, inter-elite affinity resulting from frequent passages of individuals from non-political to political elite and vice versa. The extent to which non-political and political elites are intertwined and affected by mutual exchanges of their personnel is variable and can change over time and between political systems.

All liberal democracies define a set of rules that individual actors must follow to become and remain chief executives. While presidents in presidential and semi-presidential systems are normally

subordinate to constitutional term limits, there is no limitation to the number of appointments or to the tenure a prime minister can enjoy. However, electoral presidencies as well as prime ministerships are affected by a physiological level of internal circulation (i.e., turnover) of office holders. This circulation does not, per se, guarantee external circulation and, eventually, the renewal of the elite configuration. Renewal, indeed, requires external circulation and implies that outgroup actors with alternative individual backgrounds make inroads into the recruitment pool for the chief executive position. For example, there is external circulation when businesspeople with little or no political experience succeed in getting elected, moving from the economic to the political elite[6] (Costa Pinto et al. 2018): Donald Trump is case in point. A more radical version of external circulation occurs when former elites are replaced *tout court* by new elites, for example as a consequence of regime change (Schmitter 2018).

Therefore, personnel turnover is a necessary but not sufficient condition for renewal. In this regard, the literature points out that extensive elite renewals are likely to be produced by substantial sociopolitical changes, while in "normal" times internal elite reproduction is the norm (Szelényi and Szelényi 1995; Best and Becker 1997). Although democracies need a certain degree of political elites' permeability and a minimum of regular renewal (Pareto 1983), (too) frequent changes and lack of elite cohesion might be conducive to low professionalisation and poor political performance (see Putnam 1976: 66).

2.3 | Chief executives' careers and political professionalisation

The career path of chief executives denotes their type of socialisation in public life and the degree of previous belonging (if any) to any elite. To the extent to which, before entering office, a chief executive has mostly occupied political positions (for example in the local government or in the legislature) and has specialised in politics, she can be posited to be a professional politician (King 1981; Allen and Cairney 2017).

Following Gerber et al. (2009, p. 304), a career is a set "of [educational and] work-related activities and adventures that an individual experiences, perceives, and acts on during a lifetime". Therefore, the educational and professional positions that a chief executive has followed are proxies of her previous career (Müller-Rommel et al. 2020). The most common career steps that numerous chief executives regularly make before entering office define their overall career patterns. The more career patterns are fixed and predictable, the more ambitious politicians are expected to follow predefined career paths to power. The likelihood that a chief executive gains also non-political experience (for example in the private economic sector) before her investiture is higher when there is interpenetration between political and non-political elites, and when non-political experience provides technical skills to perform in office (e.g., Herzog 1975).[7] As Nicholls (1991, p. 170) argues, "[i]f an analysis of opportunities is limited to the political sphere, […] much of the potential explanatory power […] is lost". Politicians' career trajectories are often based on tacit but clear criteria to decide who is fit to govern, producing what Dogan (1989, p. 8) calls the "institutionalization of career ladders". The existence of institutionalised career patterns that are made up of several political positions can be understood as an indicator of chief executives' political professionalisation (Borchert 2011), "which refers to the individual [political] skills and resources [… chief executives] bring to the position" (Shair-Rosenfield and Stoyan 2017, p. 305–306).

The scholarship has found a positive correlation between trends towards political professionalisation in modern democracies and profound elites' transformation. For Eliassen and Pedersen (1978, p. 291), political professionalisation implies "a process by means of which social status gives way to political status as the basic criterion for [… political] recruitment: ascription and social achievement are replaced by political experience and political achievement as professionalization unfolds". Possible de-professionalisation, therefore, should imply a new reconfiguration of political elites.

As Verzichelli (1998) stresses, political professionalisation is often gathered within party organisations. This applies to parliamentary systems, rather than presidential and semi-presidential systems with constitutionally strong heads of state. While in the former chief executives go through long and painstaking party apprenticeship before being appointed, in the latter parties prefer to support candidates with lower political experience but with high public appeal (Samuels and Shugart 2010). Depending on the institutional setting as well as on demand and supply preferences about chief executives (Eulau and Czudnowski 1976; Norris and Lovenduski 1995), parties act as gatekeepers through political recruitment, which "filters some [individuals] over others, on a systematic basis. […] The criteria which are relevant for success can vary from one country to another" (Norris 1997, p. 5–6). However, due to decline of party government, even in parliamentary systems parties have become more likely to select internal "outsiders", inasmuch as these politicians are catalysts of personal votes. In these systems, moreover, the presidentialisation of politics has made it easier for political entrepreneurs to establish new parties to support their electoral campaigns and their governmental action (Müller-Rommel et al. 2022). Overall, the competitiveness of the recruitment process is a function of the number of available candidates to the chief executive office, all else equal (Dogan 1989, p. 6–7).

How can one explain the development and establishment (and ruptures) of stable and self-reproducing patterns of career advancements and political recruitment among democratic chief executives?

3 | EXPLAINING THE REPRODUCTION OF CHIEF EXECUTIVES' CAREER PATTERNS IN DEMOCRACY

3.1 | Path dependency and the institutionalisation of career patterns

As raised in the introduction, this article claims that the comparative study of chief executives' careers might benefit from the integration of the path dependency-related arguments. Path dependence theory plays a prominent role in many explanations of institutional, organisational, and behavioural persistence in the social sciences. Although originally introduced in economics (Arthur 1994), the concept of path dependence has been successfully adapted to the study of political processes (Pierson 2000). However, to my knowledge, a systematic application for the understanding of elite reproduction's mechanisms is still lacking, despite its heuristic potential (Pierson 2004, p. 176–177).

According to Pierson (2000, 2004), any social causal mechanism is informed by a temporal dimension, which should be taken duly into account to unpack the nexuses between "relatively fixed institutional features of the political landscape" and "the 'stickiness' of inherited social arrangements" (Pierson 2004, p. 8). From an epistemological viewpoint, the path dependence approach departs from functional explanations by understanding political phenomena (also) as by-products of long-term structural processes and the strategic reaction of political agents (Pierson 2004). Through their mutual interactions, political actors can either reinforce the status quo or, under specific conditions, favour institutional change. That said, the interaction between multiple institutions' effects and conflictual actors' interests can lead to ununited outcomes. In particular, this is likely to occur when actors do not behave instrumentally, when they decide based on short-time horizons, or when exogenous shocks put existing institutional arrangements to the test (Pierson 2004, p. 109–122).

With regard to career patterns, the higher the number of chief executives in a given country who reach their office after following similar trajectories and acquiring similar professional experience, the safer it is to state that career paths to power are *institutionalised*. In other words, routes to power are ordered and predictable, as well as accepted and recognised as appropriate by the society (i.e., ambitious politicians, party gatekeepers, pressure groups, voters) (see Lane and Ersson 2000, p. 26–27; March and Olsen 2006, p. 4); quoting Huntington (1968, p. 12), a specific *cursus honorum* for future chief executives "acquire[s] value and stability". Each career step, therefore, turns out to be

valuable to the extent to which it provides crucial experiences and skills to become chief executive and to govern (Friedenberg and Levitsky 2006).

Within given legal contexts and formal party regulations, the institutionalised rules that inform chief executives' careers are mostly *informal*, that is, "socially shared […], usually unwritten, […] created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels". The main sanction for those who do not respect these rules (i.e., those who do not follow a prearranged career trajectory) is career failure (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, p. 727, quotation in italics in the original). Ambitious politicians are thus motivated to pursue the "prescribed" career pathways (cf. Lauth 2015, p. 58). In a nutshell, rules "transform the ambition for [career] advancement […] into constraint, thereby generating enduring regularities in the choices of individuals" (Soskice et al. 1992, p. 548).

Assuming – as said above – that ingroup members of the political elite are interested in avoiding the entry of individuals with deviant socio-economic and professional backgrounds, dominant party leaders and party gatekeepers will try to block whoever does not follow the common career trajectory. Once a certain power equilibrium emerges between dominant political groups, career patterns are likely to reproduce themselves, in a loop where power generates power and insiders close the doors to outsiders. In other words, power relationships become path dependent (Pierson 2015). This loop will not break until external changes in the power basis of the existing political elite does not create a window of opportunity for counter-elites and other potential new members. What causal mechanisms explain the stability of chief executives' career patterns?

3.2 | Mechanisms of elite reproduction and the periodical redefinition of career patterns

According to Page (2006, p. 88), four mechanisms can make political processes path-dependent: increasing returns; self-reinforcement; positive feedback; and lock-in. While self-reinforcement can be simply understood as a drive behind positive feedback and institutional circles (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012), lock-in suggests a "state of things" rather than a causal mechanism (Liebowitz and Margolis 1995). Therefore, this article claims that only increasing returns are causal mechanisms in the strict sense. It is worth noting that pronounced increasing returns are conducive to severe "lock-in" situations.

Increasing returns imply that "the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down the path. This is because the *relative* benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time. To put it a different way, the costs of exit […] rise" (Pierson 2000, p. 252, emphasis in the original). Therefore, increasing returns make the modification of accepted social norms increasingly costly and the likelihood of irreversibility higher over time (Pierson 2004, p. 64). With reference to chief executives' career patterns, the more chief executives with specific backgrounds and professionalisations enter office and prove to be fit to govern (whatever it might mean), the more the risk of "testing" alternative profiles will be perceived high by political stakeholders (e.g., voters, parties, and pressure groups). To put it differently, the institutionalisation of chief executives' career patterns in a country and the related increasing returns will make U-turns more difficult, generating career patterns' longitudinal stability.[8]

> "A central reason is the prevalence of adaptive expectations. When picking the wrong horse may have very high costs, actors must constantly adjust their behavior in the light of how they expect others to act. […] In addition, many types of collective action involve high start-up costs" (Pierson 2000, p. 258).

Unless contingent and rare circumstances make convenient for ambitious politicians to deviate from institutionalised career patterns, political outsiders hardly have a chance to take over. "Once in place, institutions […] take on a life of their own and become genuinely independent causal forces

in shaping further institutional development" (Pierson 2004, p. 131). In other words, the thesis of path dependency-based institutionalist analyses is that strong structural constraints hinder gradual change, and that renewal occurs through "leaps" after periods of stasis, following a "punctuated" type of change (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Rational political elites modify their expectations and behaviours when they meet "new concerns", "as a result of changing circumstances [that make…] previously desirable institutional effects […] problematic" (Pierson 2004, p. 120).

In fact, in democracy the emergence of "new" profiles of political leaders is more likely when deep societal changes open contingent windows of opportunity. Inasmuch as new profiles make inroads and are perceived as credible challengers to the status quo, a restructuration of power relationships within the political elite as well as between political and non-political elites can occur and new career patterns replace the former. Among chief executives, such long-term changes, for example, have affected the selection of prime ministers in European democracies after the crisis of the party government form of representation that had characterised Western Europe after the Second World War (Müller-Rommel et al. 2022).

Although unintended, the modification of career patterns among political elites tends – in theory – to follow a periodical development. This regularity in the recruitment of top members of the political elite was first described by Pareto in the early twentieth century. Recalling a Machiavellian distinction, Pareto (1983) argued that there are two types of elites ("foxes", keener to accommodation, and "lions", more assertive and keener to the co-optation of new members) and that political systems move from being ruled by the former to the latter and vice versa. When one type of elite dominates, a counter-elite forms and challenges the dominant one until the latter replaces the former. In a more recent version, the thesis of the periodical de-institutionalisation and institutionalisation of political elite' configurations has received empirical support within the study of "realigning" democratic elections and party change (see Hoffmann-Lange 2020, p. 506).

A major argument in the literature tells that the recruitment of new political leaders in modern democracies is often a result of profound socio-economic changes in the society (e.g., Mack 2010; Mair 2013). These changes threaten both the dominant position of the established political elite and the existing criteria for the recruitment of political leaders (Vogel et al. 2019, p. 4–5). In this regard, some scholars interpret the rise of new populist chief executives around the globe as a signal of replacement of a former group of rulers with strongly party-based and institutional career backgrounds with a counter-elite of outsiders (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). As Vogel et al. (2019, p. 8) point out, traditional "political parties are losing their ability to provide secure political careers to their functionaries and members".

Overall, one can thus expect to observe, within modern democratic political systems, long-term trends towards the recruitment of chief executives with similar individual backgrounds, periodically broken by profound socio-economic and political changes and the consequent establishment of new career patterns.[9] The empirical plausibility of this proposition is assessed in the next section, through an investigation of stability and change in the career patterns of the US presidents over more than 200 years. The findings are not meant to be generalised to other countries; their usefulness is to show to what extent this article's framework fulfils its function of organising a conceptual and theoretical map for future studies, as anticipated in the introduction.

Before making this step, it is worth reminding that the analysis rests upon an explanatory configurational – rather than variable-oriented – approach (Rihoux and Ragin 2008). The variable-oriented approach posits that each explanatory variable exerts a net effect on the dependent variable; in this case, knowing what explains stability is equivalent to knowing what fosters change (which is simply the absence of the most significant explanatory factors). In contrast, the configurational approach assumes causal asymmetry, in that it claims that a given outcome can result from a specific combination of conditions (or absence of conditions) (Ragin 2008). This article's argument, thus, is based on the idea that elite renewal does not appear only as a result of the lack of those conditions that create stability; rather, they need a specific combination of conditions, which breaks path-dependent career pattern reproduction.

4 | STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE CAREER BACKGROUND OF AMERICAN PRESIDENTS, 1789–2021

The United States allows for detecting long-term trends within the same political system's institutional setting over a long period (1789–2021). It is a good case study to assess the viability of this article's propositions for four main reasons. First, it is an advanced and large capitalist democracy. These features make sure that the analysis focuses on a case of liberal democracy, which has experienced neither major changes in its economic model producing exogenous disruptive effects on elite configurations nor peculiar political recruitment dynamics characterising small states (e.g., Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). Second, the country has never experienced regime changes since its independence, being – relatively speaking – continuously democratic, particularly after the revocation of severe de jure and de facto restrictions on voting rights for large sectors of the society (Knutsen et al. 2019, p. 446–447). Third, the United States has always adopted a presidential form of government since 1789, one year after the ratification of the constitution that has remained into force in the following centuries. Fourth, the socio-economic and political history of the United States has been characterised by periodical structural changes that have transformed American democracy and the power relations between political elites and other sectors of the society (see Shafer and Badger 2001). According to this article's theoretical argument, these changes might be expected to correlate with the transformation of the career patterns of chief executives.

In operational terms, US history is divided into six periods, which correspond to six American party systems. As stressed by the specialised literature, American party systems have largely corresponded to different phases of the socio-economic history of the United States; their terminations have marked the redefinitions of political equilibria internal to political elites (Campbell 2006; Maisel and Brewer 2010). Therefore, the starting years of each party system are assumed to be also indicators – if the theory holds – of transitional moments from former to new elite configurations and career patterns. Against this background, American presidents are clustered based on the year of their investiture, from the first appointment after the end of the previous party system to the last before the start of the following. The units of analysis are all 46 presidents[10]; for each president, their educational, occupational, and political background before entering office is checked (see Appendix for details).[11] This "prosopographical" strategy (i.e., the creation of "collective biographies" of a group of people in a certain context) is particularly suitable when it comes to observing patterns of stability and change in the recruitment of chief executives in a given country. Indeed, it allows for observing "how far their skewed recruitment results from the process through which they are formally constituted as well as from the composition of the 'pools' from which their recruitment primarily occurs" (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021: 673).

For each item, the percentage of presidents in a given period with that specific background is calculated. When the most common background characterizes more than half of presidents, one can argue that there is indeed a common (reproduced) career pattern, at least as long as that item is concerned. When the high percentage of presidents defined by one specific background category is, however, constant over different periods, one should conclude that there has not been – contrary to conjectures – any profound redefinition of career patterns (and elite renewal) over time; rather, this scenario indicates that the dominant background of presidents has not changed, in spite of deep socio-economic transformations. In other words, dominant elites resisted to (or, at least, incorporated) possible alternative elites.

Table 1 shows patterns of stability and change of presidents' socio-demographic background.

All cases in which more than 50 per cent of presidents shared the same background are highlighted in bold. Overall, data shows that, except for the first decades after the independence, there have been no pronounced patterns of recruitment with regard to the state of origin or religion. However, this difference may well be due to the initial small number of states and lower pluralism of groups in the society. Similar considerations apply to the level of education, being the achievement of a

TABLE 1 Stability and change in the socio-demographic background of US presidents, 1789–2021

Period	N	Average age*	State of origin	Religion	Educational level	Alma mater	Military service	Profession
1789–1825	6	58	**Virginia** (67)	**Anglican** (50)	**Undergraduate** (67)	Harvard (33)	**83%**	**Lawyer** (67)
1829–1853	8	56	Tennessee (25)	**Anglican** (50)	**No or lower** (63)	–	**88%**	**Lawyer** (75)
1857–1893	10	53	New York (30)	Reformed (40)	**Undergraduate** (50)	–	**80%**	**Lawyer** (70)
1897–1929	7	52	Ohio (43)	Reformed (43)	**Undergraduate** (57)	–	29%	**Lawyer** (57)
1933–1963	5	54	New York (40)	–	**Undergraduate** (60)	Harvard (40)	**80%**	–
1969–2021	10	60	New York/Texas (20)	Anglican/Baptist/Protestant** (20)	**Graduate** (70)	Yale (20)	**60%**	**Lawyer** (50)
Total	*46*	*56*	*New York (20)*	*Anglican/Reformed (24)*	*Undergraduate (48)*	*Harvard (11)*	**70%**	***Lawyer** (59)*

*When entering office. **unspecified.

Notes: dates refer to years of presidential investitures. Other information indicates the most common background (respective percentage in brackets).

tertiary education relatively unlikely in the first periods. Most presidents have spent time serving in the military – except for those invested between the nineteenth and the twentieth century – and have been recruited among lawyers. However, these trends are general and hold for the whole set of presidents. This can be interpreted as a lack of the expected periodical elite renewal, as far as the socio-demographic background is concerned. The only item for which different patterns across periods emerge is the level of education, although most presidents have been characterized by undergraduate education and only in the most recent period (since 1969) the level has increased. Yet, it has been observed that not only having tertiary education can be important to becoming part of the political elite, but also the attendance of an elite university can matter, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries (Bovens and Wille 2017). Although the data about US presidents do not highlight specific patterns in this regard, one can see that the most frequently attended universities, if any, are renewed universities of Harvard and Yale.

Table 2 presents detailed information about previous political careers.

Unlike the socio-demographic data, relevant numbers display – as expected – the existence of period-related specific career patterns and regularities as well as substantial periodical modifications. In particular, the previous occupation of a seat in a state legislature characterised the chief executives of the first six decades and declined afterwards. Similarly, being state governor and member of the national House of Representatives appears as important stepping stones only until the late nineteenth century. Moreover, only the majority of presidents in the first period had been secretary of State or vice president before entering office.[12] It is worth noting that, after the second period (1829–1853), there are no cases in which more than one position was held by the majority of future presidents. The empirical evidence, therefore, suggests that the recruitment of US presidents over time has been characterised by the existence of stable career patterns, which have been replaced by alternative patterns after major societal changes. Only in the most recent period (which is also the longest, from 1969 and still in place in 2021), there seems to be no particular pattern, in that presidents have shown a large variety of political career backgrounds.

In this regard, Table 3 provides data about trends of political experience over the centuries. Following an established path in the study of political careers and chief executives' political performance, experience is simply operationalised as having occupied major political offices before being elected (see Grotz et al. 2021).

Figures in the central column refer to the percentage of presidents, for each period, with at least one experience at the state level (in the legislature or as governor) and one in the federal (i.e., central) Congress (high level of experience). The third column, in turn, shows the percentage of highly experienced presidents, i.e., having held a state legislative seat, having been governor, as well as having been member of the federal Congress.[13] An interesting insight is that the level of political experience of US presidents has decreased over time. This clarifies the absence of recent clear political career patterns of recruitment highlighted in Table 2 and is in line with similar trends in parliamentary democracies (see Müller-Rommel et al. 2022).

In summary, the empirical observation of the individual background of all US presidents has produced three main findings. First, there is evidence of the periodical establishment and replacement of career patterns, in terms of previous political position of chief executives. Evidence of this type of regularity even among a limited number of cases (46) supports the theoretical propositions, in that it suggests that variation is not probably due to idiosyncratic traits of individual presidents.

Second, patterns of political experience have become weaker over time, paired by growing percentages of presidents with relatively lower levels of political experience. Third, irrespective of which political offices have been occupied, most presidents have been recruited from a group of people characterised by high educational levels, previous military service (even in the absence of conscription), and homogenous vocational background.

TABLE 2 Stability and change in the political careers of US presidents, 1789–2021

Period	Party	Mayor	State legislator	Governor	National representative	National senator	Secretary of state	Vice President	Prior political office*
1789–1825	**Democratic-Republican** (67)	0	**50**	33	33	33	**67**	**67**	**Secretary of state** (50)
1829–1853	**Democratic/Whig** (50)	0	**75**	**63**	**75**	**63**	13	38	Vice President (38)
1857–1893	**Republican** (60)	30	40	40	**50**	30	10	20	Governor/Vice President (20)
1897–1929	**Republican** (86)	14	43	**71**	14	14	29	29	Gov./Vice Pr./Secr. (29)
1933–1963	**Democratic** (80)	0	20	20	40	**60**	0	40	Vice President (40)
1969–2021	**Republican** (60)	0	20	40	30	30	0	40	Governor/Vice President (40)
Total	*Republican (41)*	*9*	*41*	*46*	*41*	*37*	*17*	*33*	*Vice President (33)*

*Before being elected.

Notes: see Table 1. All numbers are percentages.

TABLE 3 Level of political experience across levels of government of US presidents, 1789–2021

Period	High	Very high
1789–1825	33	17
1829–1853	**88**	**50**
1857–1893	**50**	10
1897–1929	29	0
1933–1963	0	0
1969–2021	10	0

Notes: "high" means state legislator and/or governor + member of the national Congress; "very high" means state legislator + governor + member of the national Congress.
Member of the national Congress includes both representatives and senators. Numbers are percentages.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has proposed an integration of theories of institutional path dependency with the study of political elite persistence and renewal. For simplicity's sake, it has limited the attention to the holders of one specific office: the head of the political executive in democratic political systems. The core claim of the article has been that chief executives' career patterns are likely to reproduce themselves and to discourage the recruitment of people with divergent backgrounds, as effect – all else equal – of path-dependent increasing returns affecting the relational (power) system between voters, political gatekeepers, and ambitious politicians. It has also been argued that the structuration of the existing career patterns depends on the relationships between political and non-political elites. That said, career patterns can be subject to periodical reshaping, due to major societal changes. The theory tells that these changes are windows of opportunity that counter-elites and other political actors with alternative career profiles can use to become the new key members of the political elite.

Some illustrative evidence drawn from the case of the United States and its presidents over a period of more than two centuries has provided insightful support to some of the theoretical conjectures, yet with caveats. Data about socio-demographic background supports Putnam's (1976, p. 22) classic statement about the "correlation between an individual's place in the political stratification system and his [sic!] place in the social hierarchy". At the same time, there are hints that presidents' previous political experience has decreased over time and, in particular, in most recent decades. This finding confirms that "available data do not support the assumption of closed elite recruitment in today's liberal democracies" (Hoffmann-Lange 2020, p. 508). A major implication of this analysis is that, inasmuch as contemporary democratic societies tend towards individualisation, fluidity, pluralistic organisations, and assertive understandings of citizenship (Dalton and Welzel 2014), social change becomes faster and less "punctuated". In turn, this can favour the quicker de-structuration of politicians' career patterns and the emergence of relatively more open yet precarious political elites.

Empirically, future studies could extend the focus of this article to other forms of government, in a systematic and comparative manner. Older democracies, moreover, could be compared to newer regimes. Scholars could generate and assess circumscribed testable propositions related to specific claims of the framework: e.g., about which socio-demographic backgrounds and professional paths are the most intertwined with socio-political structures of opportunity and why; or about the reasons why some structural changes lead to certain types of new career patterns and not to others. To do so, the level of abstraction of this article's framework should decrease; still, the theoretical "umbrella" here presented would ultimately provide the basic assumptions behind the focused hypotheses. This would also help discuss findings' consequences for democratic governance, executive performance, and policy outputs.

From a methodological viewpoint, sequence analysis looks promising to follow this research strategy. This method is particularly suitable for detecting recurring career trajectories, providing

information about the sequence of the career positions that a chief executive has held before entering office as well as the duration in those positions. One major potential contribution of the holistic arguments about path dependency and stability is to tone down one big deficit of sequence analysis, that is, the difficulty in granting the due weight to third (extra-career) variables in the explanation of successful career pathways (Jäckle and Kerby 2018).

Theoretically, a further research outlook is the definition of those causal mechanisms that lead to the deinstitutionalisation of career patterns as a consequence of societal changes. In this regard, the path dependence approach suffers from vagueness when it comes to accounting for major change. Too often, the implicit assumption is that we are confronted with "bounded change – until something erodes or swamps the mechanisms of reproduction that generate continuity" (Pierson 2000, p. 265). The integration of theories of stability with theories of change would be a welcome contribution to the study of political careers and elite stability (e.g., Olsson 2016). This undertaking seems especially urgent in times of redefinition of party forms of representation.

NOTES

[1] This term refers to the heads of the political executive. Depending on the institutional system, the highest executive leader can be a prime minister (in parliamentary and in most semi-presidential systems) or an elected president (in presidential as well as in some semi-presidential systems, such as France). For simplicity's sake, the article's argument is limited to the three most widespread democratic forms of government, while it excludes mixed forms of rule (see Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2020, p. 765–767). Although parliamentary systems promote fusion, rather than separation, of powers, in all systems the recruitment of chief executives is likely to be more demanding that that for parliamentarians or ministers, given the scarcer availability of posts and the greater power that holders are endowed with.

[2] Giovannini and Wood (2022) advocates similar types of works, which provide an "organizing perspective". One advantage of these research outputs is that they "point […] scholars from different theoretical and empirical traditions to an inclusive discussion" of the topic at issue (Giovannini and Wood 2022: 4).

[3] See Müller-Rommel et al. (2022) for an exception.

[4] The author defines resources as "those things which are scarce, which affect people's lives, which at least some people require or want, and for which there is more demand than supply" (Etzioni-Halevy 1993: 94).

[5] Assuming that chief executives are the most important members of the political elite, this article follows a "positional" method to identify the political elite, as the set of people who occupy a formal political role that provides power resources, visibility, and influence on the country's political agenda (Hoffmann-Lange 2020: 502).

[6] This article focuses only on within-country circulation. See Solimano and Avanzini (2012) for a discussion of the international circulation of political and other elites.

[7] For example, "individuals who worked […] as lawyers or bankers should have a better grasp of legal and economic issues, and academics might understand nuances of data analysis and policy applications. […] Chief executives] with […] specialised] backgrounds may be able to recognize the potential repercussions of executive action in particular policy areas" (Shair-Rosenfield and Stoyan 2017: 306).

[8] Therefore, variations between career patterns among different political systems with similar institutional settings could be due to country-specific heritages. The point is addressed in detail by Pearson, whereby he argues that political agents might be "embedded in career trajectories where advancement depends on adherence to organizational expectations" (Pierson 2004: 114).

[9] Major socio-economic and political changes are assumed to undermine also the stabilising effects on career patters of certain socio-demographic characteristics, such as background family and type of education.

[10] Grover Cleveland was counted twice, since he became president both in 1885 as well as in 1893, after a period out of office.

[11] Information was collected from presidents' biographies on whitehouse.gov and whitehousehistory.org. When necessary, Wikipedia.org has been consulted to steer further search through online sources. The analysis gathers information about those socio-demographic and occupational characteristics which the international scholarship on political careers agrees on in understanding as crucial indicators of previous experience (e.g., Müller-Rommel et al. 2020). The choice is also justified by the use of these indicators in specific comparative studies of presidential systems (Alcántara et al. 2017).

[12] In presidential systems, vice presidency is a very publicly visible position, where the incumbent can gain substantial political capital (Marsteintredet and Uggla 2019). One should notice that a few US vice presidents became chief executives as the direct consequence of the death (e.g., Truman in 1945 or Johnson in 1963) or resignations (e.g., Ford in 1974) of the predecessor (see the Appendix). However, this possible source of 'distortion' in the findings is significantly reduced and does not affect the validity of the overall picture, since only Gerald Ford was not further popularly elected after his first mandate.

[13] Being in one or the other column is not mutually exclusive. The 'very high' column is simply based on numbers calculated with more restrictive criteria than the 'high' column.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Ferdinand Müller-Rommel for earlier discussions about the path dependent features of political careers. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their comments.

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/issj.12363

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How to cite this article: Vercesi, Michelangelo. 2022. "Are all politicians the same? Reproduction and change of chief executive career patterns in democratic regimes." *International Social Science Journal* 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12363

APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 The political experiences of US presidents before entering office, 1789–2021

President	Party	Year	Mayor	State legislator	Governor	House	Senate	Secretary of state	Vice president	Previous office
1. Washington, G.	Ind.	1789								Soldier
2. Adams, J.	Fed.	1797				X	X		X	Vice President
3. Jefferson, T.	Dem.-Rep.	1801		X	X			X	X	Vice President
4. Madison, J.	Dem.-Rep.	1809		X		X		X		Secretary
5. Monroe, J.	Dem.-Rep.	1817		X	X		X	X		Secretary
6. Adams, J.Q.	Dem.-Rep.	1825						X		Secretary
7. Jackson, A.	Dem.	1829			X	X	X			Senator
8. Van Buren, M.	Dem.	1837		X	X		X	X	X	Vice President
9. Harrison, W.H.	Whig	1841		X	X	X	X			Ambassador
10. Tyler, J.	Whig	1841		X	X	X	X		X	Vice President
11. Polk, J.K.	Dem.	1845		X	X	X				Governor
12. Taylor, Z.	Whig	1849								Soldier

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

President	Party	Year	Mayor	State legislator	Governor	House	Senate	Secretary of state	Vice president	Previous office
13. Fillmore, M.	Whig	1850		X		X			X	Vice President
14. Pierce, F.	Dem.	1853		X		X	X			Soldier
15. Buchanan, J.	Dem.	1857		X		X	X	X		Ambassador
16. Lincoln, A.	Rep.	1861		X		X				Deputy
17. Johnson, A.	Nat. Union	1865	X	X	X	X	X		X	Vice President
18. Grant, U.S.	Rep.	1869								Soldier
19. HaX, R.B.	Rep.	1877			X	X				Governor
20. Garfield, J.A.	Rep.	1881		X		X				Deputy
21. Arthur, C.A.	Rep.	1881							X	Vice President
22. Cleveland, G.	Dem.	1885	X		X					Governor
23. Harrison, B.	Rep.	1889					X			Senator
24. Cleveland, G.	Dem.	1893	X		X					President
25. McKinley, W.	Rep.	1897			X	X				Governor
26. Roosevelt, T.	Rep.	1901		X	X				X	Vice President
27. Taft, W.H.	Rep.	1909			X			X		Secretary
28. Wilson, W.	Dem.	1913			X					Governor
29. Harding, W.G.	Rep.	1921		X			X			Senator
30. Coolidge, C	Rep.	1923	X	X	X				X	Vice President
31. Hoover, H.	Rep.	1929						X		Secretary
32. Roosevelt, F.D.	Dem.	1933		X	X					Governor
33. Truman, H.S.	Dem.	1945					X		X	Vice President
34. Eisenhower, D.D.	Rep.	1953								Soldier
35. Kennedy, J.F.	Dem.	1961				X	X			Senator
36. Johnson, L.B.	Dem.	1963				X	X		X	Vice President
37. Nixon, R.	Rep.	1969				X	X		X	Vice President
38. Ford, G.	Rep.	1974				X			X	Vice President
39. Carter, J.	Dem.	1977		X	X					Governor
40. Reagan, R.	Rep.	1981			X					Governor
41. Bush, G.H.W.	Rep.	1989				X			X	Vice President
42. Clinton, B.	Dem.	1993			X					Governor
43. Bush, G.W.	Rep.	2001			X					Governor
44. Obama, B.	Dem.	2009		X			X			Senator
45. Trump, D.J.	Rep.	2017								None
46. Biden, J.	Dem.	2021					X		X	Vice President

Notes: Ind. means "Independent"; Dem.-Rep. "Democratic-Republican"; Nat. Union "National Union"; Dem. "Democrat"; Rep. "Republican". "Year" indicates the year of the entry into office. "House" and "Senate" means that the president held a seat in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, respectively. Among previous offices, secretary means "Secretary of State". "X" indicates the occupation of the relevant post.
Source: see main text.