

HOW VIEWS ABOUT POLITICAL CAREERS IMPACT WOMEN'S POLITICAL AMBITION

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Women make up a small fraction of U.S. elected officeholders – a significant fact when we remember that they are over half of the entire population. This shortfall has many explanations – including America's type of election system, biases and gender stereotypes that discourage voters from supporting female candidates, and the continuing sway of party leaders who recruit men and overlook qualified women. Nevertheless, when American women do choose to run for office, they do not seem to have unusual problems winning. However, women are often unwilling to take the steps towards an electoral run. Compared to equally qualified men, many qualified women report that they lack interest in running for political office, creating what has been dubbed a "political ambition gap." My colleagues and I investigate why this gap exists.

Perceptions of a Political Career

People gravitate toward careers that align with their personalities and allow them to accomplish valued goals. For instance, people who consider themselves caring might want to help others and thus choose a nursing career to fulfill this goal. In our study, we ask: what goals are fulfilled by political careers? Do people perceive that such careers provide opportunities to **pursue power-related goals** such as status and recognition, **communal goals** such as helping and working with others, or **independence goals**, such as deploying policy expertise? When we asked college students and college graduates in three different samples to evaluate the goals of political careers, they consistently reported that politicians spend most of their days pursuing power-related goals more than any others – through activities such as serving as a committee head, debating proposals and amendments, and negotiating with colleagues. Participants in our study of adult college graduates estimated, on average, that 50% of the politician's time was spent on these activities, relative to 25% of their time spend on independence-goal related activities (such as drafting legislation, preparing a policy speech, or reading local papers) or communal goal-related activities (such as helping constituents with their problems, listening to constituents' concerns, and working with teams to solve problems).

Are Perceptions of Political Careers Damaging to Women's Ambition?

Perceptions that politicians spend a good portion of their time on power-related goals would not contribute to any political ambition gap if women and men were equally likely to desire power. We suspected, however, that men and women would differ in their desired goals. For economic, family, and historical reasons, women have been especially involved in helping others, while men have long occupied leadership roles. This traditional division of labor is reinforced by parents and educators who encourage girls and boys to pursue opportunities stereotypically associated with their biological sex. As a result, girls not only develop personality traits necessary for success in roles typically occupied by females; they also learn to prefer such

careers. Men do the same. For example, a girl who sees that women perform childcare and is given dolls to play with probably tends to become caring towards others and may eventually prefer careers that employ caring skills. Overall, men should gravitate towards careers that fulfill power-related goals while women prefer careers that allow them to pursue communal goals.

Political careers also require a willingness to engage in conflict. Because women are socialized to be good at roles that involve helping others, they tend to want to downplay conflicts as well as shy away from fighting for power. It follows that political careers may simply be less attractive to women. Our findings fit these expectations:

- Women were less interested in conflict compared to men.
- Lower levels of interest in conflict predicted women's disinterest in power-related goals more readily than lower levels of such interest predicted such disinterest for men.
- Taken together, these two tendencies in our data accounted for women's relative lack of interest in running for office compared to men.

We also tested these ideas in an experiment. Half of the students in our sample read a description of a "day in the life" of a politician who pursued power-related goals. The other half read a description of a politician who pursued communal-related goals. The women in our study were much more interested in running for office when they read the description of the politician who helped and worked with others, whereas the men did not change their levels of interest no matter which scenario they read. Interestingly, after exposure to the scenario of a politician working with others, men and the women in our study no longer differed in their interest in running for office. But when exposed to the power scenario, men expressed significantly more ambition than the women in our experiment.

Implications

Our research suggests that women are turned off to political careers because of perceptions of what it means to be a politician. And this may matter for American politics overall, because the people most interested in a political career may be those who enjoy conflict and want to pursue power. This sort of stereotypical politician may maximize polarization in Washington DC. But branding a political career as conflictual and power-oriented may be a bit of an exaggeration. Being a true statesman, as the U.S. Founders intended, also involves helping others and using government to make one's town, state, or country a better place. Even so, social perceptions can be hard to change, particularly in a political climate where conflict seems to reign supreme.

U.S. women's political impressions do seem to be malleable. In our experiment, just a small wording change altered perceptions of how fulfilling a political career might be. Future research might explore factors lead people to view political careers in various ways. Could media coverage of cooperation in politics make a difference? And what about training for candidates? Maybe female lawmakers can help other women aspire to office, but what if learning about fundraising and conflicts push women away? Much remains to be learned, but more focus on how to change the image of political careers could help to close the political ambition gap.

Read more in Monica C Schneider, Mirya R Holman, Amanda B Diekman, and Thomas McAndrew, "[Power, Conflict, and Community: How Gendered Views of Political Power Influence Women's Political Ambition.](#)" *Political Psychology* 37, no. 4 (2016): 515-531.