

Power, Conflict, and Community: How Gendered Views of Political Power Influence Women's Political Ambition

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We provide a novel approach to understanding the political ambition gap between men and women by examining perceptions of the role of politician. Across three studies, we find that political careers are viewed as fulfilling power-related goals, such as self-promotion and competition. We connect these goals to a tolerance for interpersonal conflict and both of these factors to political ambition. Women's lack of interest in conflict and power-related activities mediates the relationship between gender and political ambition. In an experiment, we show that framing a political career as fulfilling communal goals—and not power-related goals—reduces the ambition gap.

KEY WORDS: political ambition, gender, conflict avoidance, role congruity, political behavior

Men continue to dominate representation in the United States at all levels of government (CAWP, 2013), but the causes for this disparity continue to puzzle scholars. The overwhelming majority of Americans indicate their willingness to vote for a qualified female candidate (Streb, Burrell, Frederick, & Genovese, 2008), and when women do run, they win at similar rates as men (Black & Erickson, 2003; Lawless & Pearson, 2008), which calls into question the notion that women are harmed by either stereotypes or media coverage (Dolan, 2010, 2014; Eagly, 2007; Hayes & Lawless, 2013; but see Holman, Merolla, & Zechmeister, 2011). As such, research increasingly focuses on explaining why so few women run for office in the first place (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Costantini, 1990; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor Robinson, 2008; Kenny, 2013; Krook, 2010; Lawless & Fox, 2005, 2010; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Palmer & Simon, 2003). Even so, little attention has been given to understanding perceptions of the job of being a politician and whether or not they align with women's goals. Pursuing a political career requires some level of interest in the day-to-day work

associated with political leadership and some belief that engaging in these tasks will fulfill personally important goals; therefore, understanding how men and women might differ on these factors can further our understanding of political ambition.¹

Scholarship has established that women express lower levels of political ambition than do men;² for example, in a recent study of potential political candidates, 41% of women indicated considering a political candidacy, as compared to 56% of men (Fox & Lawless, 2010, 321). We hypothesize that the “masculinized ethos” of political careers will lead both men and women to view holding office as dealing with conflict and primarily involving tasks that fulfill traditionally male-stereotypic goals, such as seeking power and recognition. We posit that two mechanisms contribute to women’s lack of political ambition: Women tend to avoid, rather than seek out, conflict (Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986) and are motivated to choose work that involves the pursuit of communal goals (e.g., helping and working with others) over power goals (e.g., power, recognition) (Diekmann, Brown, Johnston, & Clark, 2010). Using three studies, we demonstrate that these two mechanisms mediate the relationship between gender and political ambition. Furthermore, manipulating the framing of a political career as fulfilling communal rather than male-stereotypic goals reduces the gendered ambition gap. These findings have broader implications for how depictions of political careers—as conflict-heavy and fulfilling power goals—might depress women’s political ambition.

Theory and Hypotheses

Scholarship has uncovered many factors that contribute to women’s underrepresentation, including the ways in which gender stereotypes can limit women’s electability and how institutional factors such as election systems and quotas can change women’s representation (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor Robinson, 2008; Holman et al., 2011; Kenny, 2013; Krook, 2010; Schneider & Bos, 2014). Here, we focus on how the supply side, or the availability of female candidates, as another of the many factors that influence women’s representation (Franceschet, 2005; Kittilson, 2006; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Schwindt-Bayer, 2011). In particular, we concentrate on the explanation that the lower availability of female candidates is partially a function of low levels of political ambition, or an interest in seeking political office, among women.³

Lawless and Fox (2005, 2010, 2013) provide several comprehensive studies of why women in the United States report lower levels of interest in running for political office, compared to men, at all levels of government. The political ambition gap, they find, is largely based on what Social Cognitive Career Theorists (SCCT) call “background” or “contextual” factors (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Brown, Hackett, & Brown, 2002). Specifically, people—including parents, friends, and political party leaders—ask men but not women to run; this finding is affirmed by multiple studies showing that political elites often discount women’s ability to win elections (cf. Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Women also lack political self-efficacy, another key component of career choice; that is, they are less likely than men are to believe in their qualifications for office or that they will ever be qualified to run (Koch, 1997; Verba, Burns, & Scholzman, 1997). For example, a quarter

¹ Data and replication information are available from the authors upon request.

² We use the terms political ambition and interest in running for office interchangeably; political ambition refers to the broader construct, which is operationalized by questions about interest in political office and intent to run.

³ We articulate women’s political ambition as suppressed because less than 1% of all women in the United States have sought or are seeking political office (Pew, 2014). As a diverse and robust group of individuals running for office serves to reinforce traditional democratic mechanisms and provide a variety of avenues for citizens from all backgrounds to influence politics, increasing women’s political ambition can advance these democratic ends. We might also characterize men’s political ambition as inflated—that is, more men run than are actually qualified—a position that would certainly have normative implications for candidate quality and democratic representation. Without a true control group, we can only comment on women’s and men’s political ambition relative to one another.

of women and 40% of men see themselves as “very qualified” to hold political office (Fox and Lawless, 2011, 64). In short, Lawless and Fox (2005, 2010, 2013) and subsequent scholars (Fulton, Maestas, Maisel, & Stone, 2006; Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011; Williams, 2008) find that women’s lower political ambition relative to men’s is a key factor in the lack of supply of female candidates.

Although this robust literature has examined political ambition from a variety of perspectives, it remains necessary to ask ambition for *what*—that is, how is the role of political leader perceived by potential role occupants? Previous research has acknowledged that a “masculinized ethos” of politics has the potential to discourage women’s political participation (Krook, 2010; Lawless & Fox, 2005, 10; Young, 2000). We delineate the key features of this masculinized ethos that predict less participation of women in politics, even as women have increasingly entered other formerly male-dominated fields, such as medicine or business (see Diekman et al., 2010).

Core to our argument is a goal congruity framework, in which individuals seek social roles that will facilitate their valued goals (Diekman & Steinberg, 2013). In short, this perspective considers how the attributes of an individual align with the particular opportunities perceived in a role. Although previous research has argued for the existence of a masculinized ethos of politics, this research is the first to consider specifically what kinds of tasks and goals are perceived to be involved in political leadership and how these tasks and goals might appeal differentially to men and women.

We first focus on perceptions of the political career itself; central to career choice is whether the career helps one to fulfill valued goals. We concentrate on three distinct dimensions of goals: power, independence, and communion. Both power and independence are within the broad cluster of *agentic* attributes reflecting self-orientation; in contrast, communal goals reflect other-orientation (e.g., Bakan, 1966). While scholars (Diekman et al., 2010) often use a single scale to capture the power and independence aspects of agentic goals, political careers have distinctive tasks that involve seeking power and recognition (such as seeking to be a committee chair or debating an opponent) and independence tasks (such as becoming a policy expert). In particular, we expect the perception of politics as focused on power to be particularly impactful for women’s decisions. We draw from Yoder and Kahn’s (1992) theory of “power-over” as “domination and control of others” (relatively male-typical), compared to “power-to” as personal empowerment. Although it is not inherent to the political role that pursuing power is perceived as impeding communal goals, we argue that this is indeed the perception and that this perception has negative implications for women in particular.

Several reasons suggest that women and men alike will stereotype political careers as affording power goals (such as self-promotion and competition) over communal goals. The “masculinized ethos” of politics refers to control of the culture of politics by men (Lawless & Fox, 2005). In addition, these stereotypes may be perpetuated by sexism in politics, the media’s horserace coverage of political competition rather than on consensus, the association of political power and strong leadership with men, and a view of women as outsiders to the political system (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Franceschet, 2005; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Niven, 1998; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989). While some activities in a political career, such as helping constituents, collaborating to draft legislation, and serving the public, might fulfill communal goals (such as helping others and serving humanity), we argue that most of the publicly recognized activities involve the promotion of power goals.

H1: A political career will be seen as affording power goals (such as self-promotion and competition) more than communal goals (such as helping others and serving humanity).

This construal of the political role as involving the pursuit of power to the exclusion of communal goals may particularly inhibit women’s political ambition. This prediction is rooted in a social role

theoretical framework, in which broader gender roles foster sex-differentiated attributes (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Due, in part, to economic and structural realities, women have historically occupied roles that involve helping others (e.g., caring for children; private sphere), and men have historically occupied roles that involve a focus on the self (e.g., leadership; public sphere). This traditional division of labor then promotes broader gender-role expectations that are perpetuated through socialization (e.g., providing different experiences to boys and girls; rewarding some behaviors more than others) and come to be internalized. As a consequence, even though there is considerable overlap between the sexes on most psychological dimensions (Hyde, 2005), women are relatively more likely than men to adopt communal attributes (e.g., caring, nurturing) essential for success in caregiving positions, and men are more likely to adopt agentic attributes (e.g., competitiveness, independence) essential for success in public leadership positions (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Eagly et al., 2000). In turn, these gendered attributes influence the social roles that women (and men) find appealing; for example, communally oriented people seek out roles that afford communion and avoid roles that impede communion (Diekmann & Steinberg, 2013). In sum, there is a connection between experience in social roles, individual motivations to pursue particular goals, and political outcomes, including, for example, the gender gap in political attitudes (Diekmann & Schneider, 2010) and political ambition, as we propose here.

As evidence of the foundational claims of a goal congruity perspective, Diekmann, Clark, Johnston, Brown, and Steinberg, (2011) find that female undergraduates' preference for communal goals more than agentic goals is linked to the pursuit of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers—another career domain where women have not achieved parity. In the STEM domain, construing the role as relatively lacking in communal opportunities appears to be critical; that is, women especially avoid the STEM career because the role is perceived as impeding communal goals. While we draw upon this study for its evidence of the goal congruity perspective, the particular profile of goals perceived to be afforded and impeded for a political career need not be the same as STEM careers. In fact, the focus of politics on a “masculinized ethos,” as we elaborated above in Hypothesis 1, suggests that in the political domain, construing the political role as involving the pursuit of power to the exclusion of communal opportunities is critical.

H2: Women will express less interest in tasks in the political career associated with power goals than men.

The perception of the political role as spending a majority of time on the pursuit of power may also attract individuals who enjoy engaging in conflict. Women and men differ in their conflict tolerance and avoidance behavior (Tannen, 1998), as women are socialized to promote smooth interpersonal relationships and thus to avoid conflict and engage in alternative behaviors when facing it (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Holt & DeVore, 2005). Indeed, significant scholarship has found that women are less competitive and aggressive, more adverse to conflict, and less risk accepting (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Gneezy, Niederle, & Rustichini, 2003; Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999). From a social role perspective, the tendency toward smooth interpersonal relationships is part and parcel of experience and success in other-oriented roles. If the roles traditionally adopted by women (e.g., homemaker, nurse, teacher) discourage engaging in conflict, whereas the roles traditionally adopted by men (e.g., lawyer, businessman, politician) encourage engaging in conflict, then the social role theory perspective would predict that women will express more conflict-avoidance than men.⁴

⁴ Even when women select conflict-oriented positions, they often make choices consistent with communal goals, as predicted by social role theory. For example, women are more likely to seek out public service jobs in the legal profession, work in nonprofits, and often serve in public positions relating to satisfying communal interests (Deckman, 2007; Lawless & Fox, 2005).

Research demonstrates that conflict-avoidant personality traits reduce political participation (Gerber et al., 2011; Hannagan, Larimer, & Hibbing, 2013; Kam, 2012). As Ulbig and Funk (1999) note, “Conflict and politics go hand in hand” (p. 267); debates between candidates, protests, political discussion, and partisan disagreements are just a few examples of conflict in political life (Ulbig & Funk, 1999; Wojcieszak, 2011). Conflict avoidance generally leads to lower levels of political participation (Ulbig & Funk, 1999; Wojcieszak, 2011). Tolerance of and preference for interpersonal conflict, in particular, relates to political behavior as political deliberation often involves unpleasant and conflict-oriented discussions (Mansbridge, 1983; Mutz, 2002; Ulbig & Funk, 1999; Wojcieszak, 2011).

Evidence demonstrates that the approach to conflict influences how women behave politically. Women, compared to men, say that they do not have the “thick skin” to deal with the criticism or the conflict that comes in political life (Lawless & Fox, 2010, pp. 129–131). Other evidence suggests that informal political activities that involve less conflict, such as boycotting a product or signing a petition, are more attractive to women (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). We predict that not only will women be predisposed to avoid conflict, but also that this predisposition underlies the reticence of women to embrace activities associated with the power goals described earlier. Indeed, many descriptions of power goals or tasks associated with power goals include some preference for or engagement in conflict-related activities, suggesting a strong connection between conflict and power goals.⁵ We posit that interest in conflict and in tasks fulfilling power goals will serve as mediators between gender and political ambition. A mediation model seeks to evaluate and demonstrate the mechanisms underlying an observed relationship (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002) by examining how a mediating variable transfers the effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). Positing a mediating relationship leads us to three interconnected hypotheses, with posited relationships between our independent variable gender (A), our mediating variables, which include conflict avoidance (B) and interest in tasks fulfilling power goals (C), and our dependent variable political ambition (D), as outlined in Figure 1. Gender leads to a reduced interest in conflict and power-related tasks, which are both associated with political ambition. We test these hypotheses with three separate studies.

H3a: Women will express more conflict avoidance than men.

H3b: Conflict avoidance (B) will mediate or explain the relationship between gender (A) and tasks associated with power goals (C).

H3c: Conflict avoidance (B) and interest in tasks associated with power goals (C) will mediate the relationship between gender (A) and political ambition (D).

Studies show that perceptions of or interest in careers are malleable in response to frames, providing causal evidence as well as pointing to promising routes for intervention. For example, Diekman et al. (2011) find women’s interest in STEM careers improved when students read a job description framing the career as affording communal goals (helping and working with others) compared to agentic goals (working alone). Other research shows that the ambition gap disappears when female students are exposed to information about the ambition gap or interact

⁵ Indeed, in our first study (Classroom Student Sample, discussed later in the article), we evaluate gender preferences for tasks associated with power goals that include conflict elements. However, in testing our mediated relationship, we rely only on studies where conflict and tasks associated with power goals are not conflated.

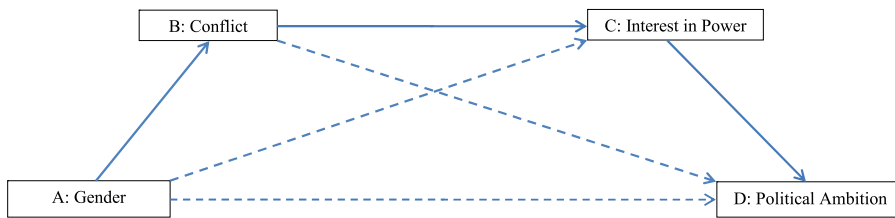


Figure 1. Expected mediated relationship between gender, conflict, interest in power tasks, and political ambition. Direct relationships represented with solid lines. Mediated relationships represented with dashed lines.

with women in political office (Greenlee, Holman, & VanSickle-Ward, 2014; Rios, Stewart, & Winter, 2010). Indeed, when negotiation strategies (which are typically thought to involve conflict) are framed as benefitting from communal skills, such as good listening or insight into feelings, women tend to do better than men in negotiation performance (Kray, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2002). For these reasons, we propose that reframing political careers to include communal goals will reduce the gender gap in political ambition. An experiment manipulating the description of the goals of political office provides an additional causal test of the hypothesized relationships.

H4: Manipulating the perceptions of a political career to focus on communal, rather than agentic, goals will make women more amenable to the political profession.

Data and Methods

Classroom Study (Study 1)

For the Classroom Study, we recruited students from a variety of different courses at a Midwestern public university for a “study about careers.” Students received either extra credit or \$2, and all were given a chance to win a \$100 gift card. We argue for the appropriateness of a college sample here because the political ambition gap widens at a college level (Lawless & Fox, 2013), and college graduates constitute a pool of future candidates.

To address Hypothesis 1 on perceptions of political careers, participants completed a measure of *goal affordances*, in which they rated a career as a member of Congress, embedded among other careers, on how much the career would fulfill a variety of abstract goals on a 7-point scale ranging from Not at all (1) to Extremely (7). In accordance with our distinction between power and independent goals, we categorize the goals into power (including power, self-promotion, conflict, and competition), independent (achievement), and communal (caring for others, serving humanity, serving the community, and working with people) dimensions.

After completion of the goal affordances, participants were randomly assigned to read a paragraph that summarized activities in a political career. Each paragraph varied in its communal (“Helping to make a difference”) or power/independence (“Having a real voice and influence”) focus. The study ended with a question that asked how “enjoyable” the career would be on a scale from “Not at all” (1) to “Extremely” (7) (see the online appendix). This experiment addresses Hypothesis 4.

The final sample consists of 413 participants. As is true of most undergraduate student populations, our sample was majority female (61%) and White (91%). Forty-five percent of the students were freshman; 55% were either 18 or 19 years old; and 69% majored in the College of Arts and Science. Eighteen percent majored in an area administered by the Political Science Department.

Online Student Study (Study 2)

We administered the Online Student Study via mTurk, Amazon.com's online marketplace for hiring individuals to complete tasks to test our full mediation model. While not a perfect sampling method, researchers have demonstrated that mTurk's respondents are more representative than convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012) but are more liberal, educated, and politically involved (Richey & Taylor, 2012). Many important social science findings have been replicated using mTurk, with the overall conclusion that mTurk produces reliable data (Berinsky et al., 2012; Horton, Rand, & Zeckhauser, 2011). In addition, the bias in the mTurk sample towards more educated and politically involved respondents may actually benefit this particular research because we are able to access a population where political ambition is more likely. We restricted the sample to college students to compare to the Classroom Study.

We measure political ambition through three measures: "Have you ever thought about running for office?"; "Which best characterizes your attitudes toward running for office in the future?"; and "At some point in your life, how likely is it that you would ever run for office?" Because these measures have varying answer options (ranging from a 4-point to 7-point scale), we standardize the measures into a single scale. To do so, we create a standardized measure where each variable has a mean of zero and standard deviation of one and then average all responses into a single composite measure, which has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. This composite is our dependent variable for the overall model proposed in Hypothesis 3c.

We also asked respondents their level of interest in 20 different political tasks associated with affording power, independence, and communal goals to test Hypothesis 2 about perceptions of the political role and our overall model in Hypotheses 3b and 3c. Ten tasks were identified in the survey as promoting power goals ("status, self-promotion, and recognition"), four tasks related to independence goals ("achievement, individualism, and demonstration of skill"), and six tasks related to communal goals ("helping and caring for others, attending to others' needs, serving humanity, and working with people").⁶ For example, the respondents read, "You will be reading three different sets of activities. This set of activities particularly promotes power goals of status, self-promotion, and recognition. For each activity, thinking about the power goal that it fulfills, please tell us your interest in the activity" and were provided power-related tasks, ranging from debating the merits of proposals and bill amendments during floor sessions to asking constituents for money and attending a public debate with an opponent.

Participants also indicated the percent of time (adding to 100%) they perceived a lawmaker spending on fulfilling power, independent, and communal goals, used in Hypothesis 1. We also asked them to place themselves on a conflict-avoidance scale ranging from "I try to avoid getting into discussions that are on unpleasant topics" (1) to "I enjoy discussions on unpleasant topics, even though it sometimes lead to arguments" (7).⁷ This question was used to test Hypotheses 3a–3c.

Our sample of 327 participants contains more men (62%), which is typical of mTurk populations. Less than 10% of the students identified as a political science major. The majority were seniors in college (47%), White (73%), and older than 21 (52%). We have no theoretical reason to believe that age, year in college, major, or race would influence gender-related differences in political ambition; we do control for these factors with no differences in our key findings (not shown).⁸

⁶ The tasks came from a report about the job descriptions of lawmakers and fall under the categories of Legislative / Policy Work, Constituent Issues, Political Campaign Work, and Press/Media Relations (Congressional Management Foundation, 2013).

⁷ This measure is adopted from Ulbig and Funk (1996); the original measure asks about political discussions.

⁸ Racial and ethnic minorities have long been excluded from participation in political life, with consequences for political ambition and interest. However, we have no reason to believe that there are race-based differences in our key mediating variables or with the hypothesized mediated relationships.

Online Adult Study (Study 3)

The Online Adult Study, administered via mTurk, allows us to conduct a robustness check on the hypothesized mediated relationships using an adult population.

The study included a replication of questions relating to task interest, conflict, and political ambition from the Online Student Study. We utilized two of the three ambition questions from the previous study: “If you have never run for office, have you ever thought about running for office?” and “At some point in your life, how likely is it that you would ever run for office?” (Lawless & Fox, 2005). We standardize each response (mean of zero and standard deviation of one) and create a single composite with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.74.

To validate our conflict measure used to test Hypotheses 3a–3c, we also examine Ulbig and Funk’s (1999) question, which frames conflict within political discussion:

Some people try to avoid getting into political discussions because they think that people can get into arguments and it can get unpleasant. Other people enjoy discussing politics even though it sometimes leads to arguments. What is your feeling on this—do you usually try to avoid political discussions, do you enjoy them, or are you somewhere in between?

Respondents could select a value on a scale of 1 to 7. In addition, we used The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory, which identifies five styles of management from the Mouton-Blake grid, including Communal, Forcing, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating (Morrill & Rudes, 2010; Blake & Mouton, 1964). To measure the Forcing traditional conflict management style, respondents were asked to consider their “response in situations where your wishes differ from those of another person” and evaluate how characteristic (from “Not at all characteristic” [1] to “Very characteristic” [5]) it is to “devote more attention to making sure others understand the logic and benefits of my position than I do to pleasing them.” We focus on this style of conflict management as extant research demonstrates clear gender differences on this measure, and it closely matches our first measure of conflict-aversion.

The Adult Online Study consisted of 353 subjects, the majority of whom were male (63%), White (80%), non-Hispanic (94%), and college graduates (84%). On average, the group graduated from college 16 years ago and made between \$40,000 and \$60,000 in annual household income. We expect this group to express relatively lower and more stable levels of political ambition, given that these users have had longer contact with the political system and may have a more realistic view of what it takes to run for political office. In addition, research on the gender gap in political ambition finds higher levels of interest in running for office among college students (Lawless & Fox, 2013). This group also represents an ideal test case because if political ambition relates to conflict and interest-in-power tasks among a group of adults taking surveys online, then it should relate among other populations that are more likely to run for political office.

Results

Political Career Perceptions (H1)

We first consider general perceptions of power, independent, and communal goals fulfilled by political careers using the Classroom Study. We find evidence for Hypothesis 1: participants viewed a member of Congress as providing the opportunity to engage in power (mean = 5.81, on a 1–7 scale) and independent (mean = 5.72) goals more so than communal (mean = 4.94) goals; $F(2,806) = 112.1, p < .01$.

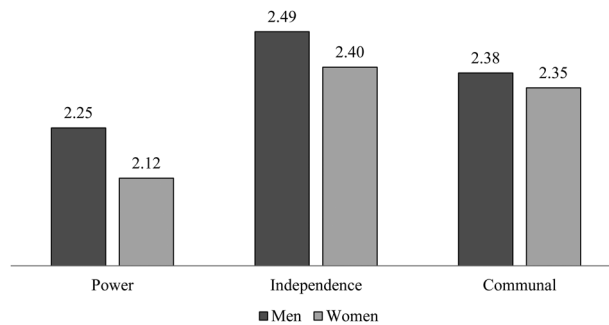


Figure 2. Gendered differences in interest in tasks that fulfill power or communal goals. Data from the Online Student Study. Participants rated their interest in a series of tasks associated with power, individualism, and communal goals on a scale of 1 to 5. Scores are the average level of interest in these tasks.

Similarly, in the Online Student Study, male and female participants alike believe that members of Congress spend more time on tasks that fulfill power goals (estimated at 60% of their time) than on tasks that relate to independent goals (24%) or communal goals (16%; multivariate test of equal means, Hotelling $F(2,321) = 247.21, p < 0.00$). The respondents in the Online Adult Study also view political careers as involving the pursuit of power goals (51% of a lawmaker's time) over independence goals (25%) or communal goals (23%); multivariate test of equal means, Hotelling $F(2,342) = 100.65, p < 0.00$). Thus, across three studies, we find that respondents believe the role of politician to involve power goals and tasks more than communal goals and tasks, supportive of Hypothesis 1.

Power Goals (H2)

Both online studies demonstrate gender differences in interest in tasks that fulfill power goals (H2). Figure 2 presents the average level of interest of men and women in each group of tasks in the Online Student Study, supporting Hypothesis 2: women express slightly lower levels of interest in tasks that fulfill power goals (mean = 2.12) than do men (mean = 2.25), $F(1,317) = 2.48, p < 0.10$, but no differences in interest in tasks that afford independence or communal goals. The data from the Online Adult Study confirm these results: men express slightly higher levels of interest in tasks that fulfill power goals (mean = 2.41) than do women (mean = 2.28; $F(1,351) = 2.73, p < 0.10$), but equal levels of interest in tasks that fulfill communal goals.⁹ Thus, across two samples, we find that men express slightly greater interest than do women in tasks affording power goals.

Interest in Conflict (H3a)

Respondents in the Online Student Study indicated their level of comfort with discussions on “unpleasant topics” for our measure of conflict. Women expressed a statistically significantly lower (mean = 4.03) level of interest in conflict than did men (mean = 4.58), $F(1,315) = 6.67, p < 0.01$. Using data from our Online Adult Study, our findings are confirmed using all three conflict measures. On our original measure, women again express a lower level of interest in conflict (mean = 3.7) than did men (mean = 4.15; $F(1,351) = 4.91, p < 0.03$). We also use Ulbig and Funk's (1999) measure and find that women are less interested in potentially unpleasant political discussions (mean = 3.66) than are men (mean = 4.13), a statistically significant difference; $F(1,350) = 5.07, p < 0.02$. We also

⁹ While it might seem surprising that men and women do not differ on interest in communal goals, prior research suggests that social desirability may play a role in men's response; that is, characteristics - and by extension, goals—associated with women are seen in a particularly positive light, called the “women are wonderful” effect (Eagly and Mladinic, 1994).

examine the Forcing (“I devote more attention to making sure others understand the logic and benefits of my position than I do to pleasing them”) form of conflict management and find clear gender differences. Men (mean = 3.71) are more likely to choose the Forcing conflict management style as compared to women (mean = 3.44), a statistically significant difference, $F(1,350) = 5.29, p < 0.02$.¹⁰ These three measures have an alpha of 0.74, suggesting our original measure highly relates to other conflict measures.

Gender, Conflict Tolerance, Power Goals, and Political Ambition (H3b)

Conflict-tolerance and interest in tasks that afford power goals should mediate the relationship between gender and political ambition such that women and men will express similar levels of political ambition once we control for a predisposition towards conflict and interest in tasks that afford power goals (H3b).

The responses in both the Online Student Study and the Online Adult Study demonstrate clear gender differences in political ambition. As we discussed above, in the Online Student Study, we use three questions and standardize them into a single composite measure. Men’s average composite political ambition (0.09) exceeded women’s political ambition (−0.10); $F(1,322) = 12.34, p < 0.04$.¹¹ The responses in the Online Adult Study demonstrate a similar pattern of differences in political ambition between men and women. We use two questions and again standardize the two variables. Overall, men’s average political ambition score on this standardized measure (0.14) is higher than women’s average score (−0.24); $F(1,333) = 15.59, p < 0.00$.

Each of our measures of the masculinized ethos relate to political ambition. In the Online Student Study, political ambition and conflict are positively correlated, with increased levels of political ambition associated with higher levels of a preference for conflict, $F(6, 306) = 11.23, p < 0.00$. Interest in running for political office also correlates to interest in tasks that fulfill power goals, $F(30,294) = 9.43, p < 0.00$. In the Online Adult Study, both conflict measures relate positively to political ambition. The first conflict measure (which is a general preference for conflict): $F(6, 329) = 9.72, p < 0.00$ and the second conflict measure, which is Ulbig and Funk’s (1999) measure about political conflict $F(6, 328) = 10.68, p < 0.00$ are both statistically related to political ambition. Those who chose the Forcing form of conflict management are more likely to have higher political ambition as well $F(4,331) = 3.12, p < 0.02$.

We use joint significant tests on data from the Online Student Study (MacKinnon et al., 2002) and bootstrapping on standard errors to calculate multiple mediator effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008). In other words, we engage in a causal steps test to evaluate multiple hypotheses relating to individual relationships in the model and bootstrapping, where we estimated the standard errors between gender (A), conflict tolerance (B), and interest in tasks related to power goals (C). We then drew 5,000 bootstrap samples, estimated the same models for each bootstrap sample, used those standard errors to form the distributions, and rejected the null of an unmediated model for the relationship *overall* between gender, conflict tolerance, interest in tasks related to power goals, and political ambition because our confidence intervals did not contain zero.¹²

In Figure 3, gender (A) has a significant *direct* relationship with conflict tolerance (B), interest in tasks fulfilling power goals (C), and political ambition (D). However, the relationship between gender

¹⁰ Women were more likely to choose other styles of conflict management, including avoiding and accommodating.

¹¹ No clear differences emerge in political ambition because of age, year in school, or race. Political science majors are more interested in running for political office.

¹² Bootstrapping can provide increased performance and decreased bias in the distribution of standard error estimates in mediation models. Taylor et al. (2007) demonstrate that bootstrapping can be generalized from a two-step to a three-step mediation. We did not need to adjust the distribution of the bootstrap distribution as it centered on the sample estimate. Bootstrapping also provides some level of assurance that we are not overestimating the significance of our models.

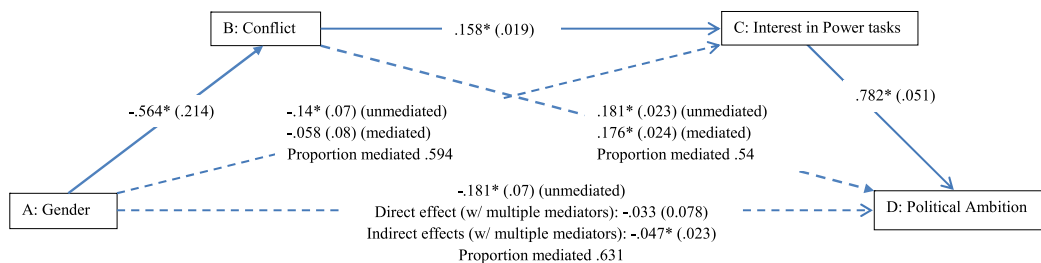


Figure 3. Mediated relationship between gender, conflict, interest in power tasks, and political ambition. Data from the Online Student Study. Standard errors in parentheses. Direct relationships represented with solid lines. Mediated relationships represented with dashed lines. Multiple mediation effects calculated using bootstrapping (5000 samples drawn) in Stata. Joint significant tests used to evaluate casual steps (MacKinnon et al., 2002). * $p < 0.05$.

(A) and interest in tasks fulfilling power goals (C) dissipates once we introduce conflict tolerance as a mediator (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007; MacKinnon et al., 2002). Similarly, the direct relationship between gender (A) and political ambition (D) is significant without mediators. However, once we estimate multiple mediation effects, the direct relationship becomes insignificant, with a significant indirect relationship.¹³ When we test the effect of gender through conflict tolerance and interest in tasks that fulfill power goals, the total indirect effect is significant ($se = 0.006$; percentile confidence interval = $-.233$ to $.022$), as is each individual indirect effect.

In the Online Adult Study, we find similar results to Figure 3 and confirm that our findings hold up with the different conflict predisposition measures. Overall, the proportion of the relationship between gender and political ambition accounted for by our mediators ranges, depending on the measure of conflict tolerance used, from 0.314 to 0.712; full results are available in the online appendix. However, unlike with the Online Student Study, gender continues to exert a direct, negative relationship with political ambition, even with our mediators. We believe that this is due to adults having more crystallized attitudes towards running for political office compared to students. As preferences for political office are more formed and less malleable among adults, we expect the factors discussed in other literature (such as the role of gatekeepers and efficacy) to matter more for adults (Fox & Lawless, 2005; Lawless & Fox, 2010; Fulton et al., 2006).

In sum, once we control for the mediating effect of interest of engaging in conflict, two key relationships become insignificant (in the Online Student Sample) or decrease (in the Online Adult Sample): the relationship between gender and tasks that fulfill power goals as well as the relationship between gender and political ambition. Thus, we find support for Hypotheses 3b and 3c and that one principal route of the relationship between gender and political ambition is *through* interest in conflict and interest in tasks affording power goals.

Framing Political Careers (H4)

If the perception of political careers as fulfilling power-related goals is important to women, as our findings suggest, emphasizing opportunities to meet different sets of goals should affect women’s positivity towards a career in politics. We engage in an experimental evaluation of whether framing political careers in terms of fulfilling agentic goals (both power and independent) or communal goals can reduce the gender ambition gap. Using the experiment in second part of the Classroom study, we find in an ANOVA that the *framing x participant gender interaction* was significant $F(1,373) = 4.42$, $p < .05$. That is, when participants received the scenario describing a political career as engaging in

¹³ These results are confirmed using Zellner’s seemingly unrelated regression analysis (see the online appendix).

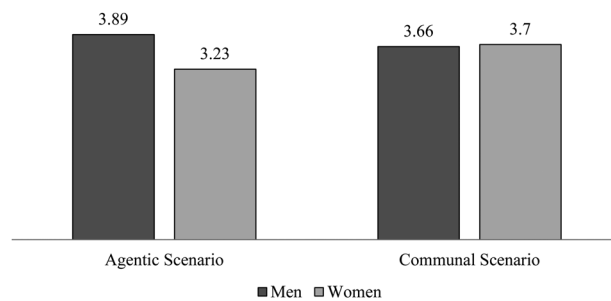


Figure 4. Post-manipulation enjoyableness ratings of political careers by gender. Data from the Classroom study. Participants first reviewed a paragraph describing a political career. Subjects indicated on a scale of 1–7 “How enjoyable” they would find the position.

tasks that fulfill power and independence goals, men rated the career as more enjoyable than did women. However, as displayed in Figure 4, when political careers were described in a communal manner, women’s reporting of enjoyment increased significantly such that there were no longer significant differences between men and women. In a fairly simple and straightforward method, we were thus able to close the gender gap in projected enjoyment of a political career.

Discussion

The gender gap in political ambition is one factor standing in the way of women achieving political parity. While extant scholarship has focused on the background and institutional factors that hold women back from seeking political careers (Lawless & Fox, 2005, 2010; Lawless & Pearson, 2008), little attention had yet been paid to how women perceive political careers and how these perceptions limit political ambition. Our research does so. We demonstrate first that political careers are seen as fulfilling power goals more than communal goals. This perception of political careers poses a problem for women in two ways: women have less interest in job tasks associated with the pursuit of power and in engaging in conflict. As such, women’s disinterest in conflict *and* in tasks affording power goals mediates the relationship between gender and political ambition. The mediated, indirect effects are powerful enough to eliminate or reduce the relationship between gender and political ambition. Finally, we use experimental research to demonstrate perceptions of careers are one cause of the political ambition gender gap, as the gap disappears when we describe the life of a political representative as affording communal, rather than power and independent, goals.

While *conflict avoidance*, as one tendency that limits women’s political ambition, can be construed as a deficiency for women, an alternative framing could focus on women’s strengths. Indeed, feminine personality traits such as promoting compromise and smooth interpersonal relationships could be very desirable in political circumstances. Therefore, the low level of women’s representation has implications for the quality of political decision making. Women’s involvement in decision-making processes can increase the decision-making capacity of the group, improve cooperation, and lead to alternative solutions to public problems (Beaman, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012; Hannagan & Larimer, 2010); increasing the presence of female legislators also reduces the level of competitiveness among men and women (Rosenthal, 2000). Indeed, women’s alternative approaches to policy-making may improve the process, lead to more inclusive decision making, or improve public perception of political actors, or, as Williams notes, “the formulation of good public policy depends crucially upon [women’s] input into the decision-making process” (2000, 132; Mansbridge, 1999; Williams, 2000; Young, 1990). Work on Iowa’s requirement for gender-balancing on local boards and other similar projects shed light on the implications of women’s representation—and their lack of

interest in conflict— in political bodies (Hannagan et al., 2013). Thus, our findings have implications for the quality of deliberation and democracy in our political bodies.

Our findings suggest that the frames around the activities and goals of political leaders matter, particularly for women. For example, the media's focus on horse race coverage and descriptions of the political process as fraught with conflict and partisan bickering may exacerbate the gender gap in ambition (Mutz, 1995). A focus on diplomacy and compromise would paint a very different picture of political careers, and this emphasis could draw in more communally oriented women *and* men. The reluctance of the media and political campaigns to identify how the government helps people could be another contributing factor in the "masculinized ethos" of politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996).

This research contributes to the emerging literature on the goal congruity perspective in important ways. First, although research on the goal congruity framework was initiated to explain the gender gap in STEM pursuits and has been successfully applied to gender gaps in business (Kennedy & Kray, 2013; McCarty, Monteith, & Kaiser, 2014), the current research provides evidence that agentic and communal motives are critical to understanding women's and men's career decisions in the political domain as well. Second, the current research provides clear evidence that different motivational profiles emerge as important for different social roles, thus broadening the goal congruity literature. In STEM, the perceived lack of communion matters more than the perceived opportunity for agency (Diekmann et al., 2010). In contrast, gender-differentiated interest in power and conflict predict women's disinclination toward seeking political office. Seeking power in the stereotypic "masculinized ethos" of politics may signal a lack of concern for others, although this perception can be altered (and the gender gap can disappear) through information about how the political role serves communal goals. The current research thus provides evidence in a novel occupational domain and with novel motivational profile for the underlying goal congruity principle: Observers are attracted to social roles that they think will afford their valued goals, and observers avoid social roles that they think will fail to afford those valued goals.

While women may dislike political careers because they see them as affording power more than communal goals, research suggests that women *in* political office spend more time, compared to men, on tasks that fulfill communal goals (Duerst-Lahti & Johnson, 1990; Kathlene, 1989; Lang-Takac & Osterweil, 1992; Tilly & Gurin, 1990). Unfortunately, women may not know the possibilities of transforming the office from within. Additional research might explore this relationship more fully by examining whether perceptions of the power and communal goals fulfilled by holding office differ with the presence or absence of female leaders. Our research also suggests that political gatekeepers and recruiters could be more successful in convincing women to run for political office if they frame such appeals in communal terms. Given that extant research demonstrates the importance of women receiving encouragement to run for office (Lawless & Fox, 2005), the impact of these frames may be even more important. Indeed, we have suggested a number of ways that changing the framing of political careers could potentially alter women's political ambition. In sum, our research not only points to an explanation for the gender gap in ambition but also to potential solutions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Political Ambition Questions

Political Ambition, Gender, Conflict, and Power Tasks

Mediated Relationship between Gender, Conflict, Interest in Power Tasks, and Political Ambition, Online Adult Study

Questions for Key Measures from Studies 1, 2, and 3