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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preferences for and perceptions about politicians' goals and how they impact women's and men's political ambition

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Women consistently report lower levels of nascent political ambition than men, which causes problems for the recruitment of women in politics. The aim of this study is to better understand the mechanisms behind this gender gap by simultaneously studying the extent to which gender differences in *preferences* for and *perceptions* about the typical goals attained through a political career (power, independence and communal goals) can explain gender differences in political ambition. Using data collected among Belgian political and social sciences students ($N = 322$), our results provide a strong confirmation of the gender gap in political ambition. We also find substantial gender differences in preferences for and perceptions about goals pursued through political careers. However, these individual-level differences in preferences and perceptions only marginally reduce the gender gap in political ambition, emphasising the need for active political recruitment.

Key words gender • political ambition • political representation • goal congruity

Key messages

- There is a gender gap in political ambition, even among political and social sciences students.
- Women are less attracted to the independence and power goals of a political mandate than men.
- Women are interested in achieving communal goals but believe that they are not central to a political mandate.
- Preferences for and perceptions about power goals explain political ambition but not the gender gap.

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Introduction

The first step towards a political career is showing political ambition, understood as the willingness to run for political office. Research has consistently shown that women have lower levels of political ambition than men (Lawless and Fox, 2010; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Allen and Cutts, 2020; Dahl and Nyrup, 2021), which causes problems for the recruitment of women for a political mandate and affects their representation in politics.

In this article, we want to get a better understanding of the mechanisms behind the gender gap in *nascent* political ambition. *Nascent* political ambition has been defined by Fox and Lawless (2005) as the embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest. It can be distinguished from *expressive* political ambition, which refers to whether individuals choose to enter a specific political contest. In other words, we focus on the intention to run for office in general, without reference to a particular candidacy for a specific election.

To improve our understanding of the gender patterns in nascent political ambition, we focus on the extent to which individual-level differences in *preferences* for and *perceptions* about attaining the typical goals of a political career can help explain gender differences in political ambition. Following Schneider et al (2016), we posit that individuals will seek social roles that facilitate the goals they value. Hence, if people like the goals typically attained by a political career (*preferences*), they will have higher levels of political ambition. However, building on the 'goal congruity framework' (Diekman and Steinberg, 2013), we argue that what matters is not only citizens' preferences, but also their beliefs about how important these goals are for politicians (*perceptions*). This perspective considers how the attributes of an individual align with the opportunities *perceived* in a role. It is, therefore, crucial to simultaneously study preferences and perceptions if we want to get a full understanding of political ambition and gender differences therein. It does not matter, for example, whether someone likes cooking (high preference) if this person believes that political representatives do not consider cooking important for a political career (low perception). In this case, one's affinity for cooking will not impact one's political ambition. We suggest that when the goals that citizens prefer are in line with the goals that they think political representatives consider as important, a political career becomes an attractive option to them, causing a high level of political ambition.

Following Schneider et al (2016), our research focuses on three political career goals, that is, communal, power and independence goals, which refer to doing something for society, exercising power and developing one's own ideas, respectively. Politics is evidently associated with competition, political power, strong leadership and independency (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), but some political activities, such as helping others and serving humanity, clearly fulfil communal goals as well. Hence, studying the three goals allows us to grasp the total complexity of the goals associated with a political mandate and include goals that can attract women and men to a different extent.

While Schneider et al (2016) only consider the perceptions of these goals on the aggregate level, we argue that these perceptions may differ between individuals. In particular, we suggest that there may be gender differences in perceptions about the goals typically achieved through political careers, as women are more likely than are men to perceive politics – which is gendered as masculine and framed as an expression of male emotionality (Marshall, 1984) – from an outsider perspective

(Martin and Collinson, 2002). It is thus important to look at the interaction between preferences and perceptions at the *individual* level.

To answer our research question, we rely on a survey conducted among students of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University (Belgium). Our analyses provide evidence of substantial gender differences in both preferences for and perceptions about goals to be pursued by a political career. We also find a strong gender gap in political ambition. However, while preferences for and perceptions about goals do matter for political ambition, they do not help explain the gender gap in political ambition.

Gender and political ambition

Causes of women's under-representation have been studied extensively, with research focusing on, for example, when and where in the recruitment process women tend to fall out or be most likely to be under-represented (compared with men). Kjaer and Kosiara-Pedersen (2019) argue that the political recruitment patterns of women follow an hourglass shape, with the lowest number of women among the potential candidates (as compared with voters and party members, as well as nominated candidates and MPs). The hourglass pattern thus suggests that the supply of potential candidates is an important bottleneck in the representation of women; a supply that is influenced by individuals' political ambition.

Expressive and *nascent* types of political ambition can be distinguished. The former refers to the actual decision to run as a candidate in a particular election. Nascent political ambition refers to a more general interest in office seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest. It is about the intention to run for office someday, without reference to a particular candidacy for a specific election (Fox and Lawless, 2005). Although Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) have shown that nascent ambition does not necessarily need to precede expressive ambition (as they can occur simultaneously when people are incited by others to run), nascent political ambition is an important element in the recruitment process leading to a political mandate.

Several studies have revealed that women have lower levels of both nascent and expressive political ambition than men (Lawless and Fox, 2010; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Allen and Cutts, 2020; Dahl and Nyrup, 2021), and a variety of explanations for the gender gap in both nascent and expressive political ambition have been suggested (Krook, 2010; Piscopo and Kenny, 2020). Broadly defined, structural and individual-level explanations can be distinguished. On the structural level, research highlights the importance of political culture, including media sexism (Haraldsson and Wängnerud, 2019), the electoral system (Coffé and Davidson-Schmich, 2020), political socialisation (Fox and Lawless, 2005; Galais, 2018) and the presence of role models (Ladam et al, 2018).

The focus of the current study is on the individual level, where three major explanatory factors can be distinguished. First, women are less convinced than men about their (political) capabilities. Even when having similar qualifications, women rate their competences lower than men do (Lawless and Fox, 2010; Dahl and Nyrup, 2021). This is due to traditional socialisation patterns and gender stereotyping creating and reinforcing the idea that women are not capable of functioning in politics (Pruysers

and Blais, 2017). Evidently, this underestimation of their own capabilities and their lack of political self-confidence have a negative effect on women's political ambition.

Second, women are more conflict avoidant and risk averse (or, in this context, more 'election averse') than men (Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Bauer and Darkwah, 2020). Electoral contests are highly competitive, often emphasising 'agentic' attributes, such as self-confidence and dominance. Such a competitive context does not tend to attract women (Schmitt et al, 2008), who rather tend to be attracted by 'communal' attributes, such as kindness and sensitivity (Conroy and Green, 2020). Relying on an experimental design, Kanthak and Woon (2015) have demonstrated that women are not less likely to be a candidate when an election is made at random, thus outside a competitive and strategic electoral context, while they are less likely to come forward as a candidate in a competitive election.

Third, women have lower levels of political interest and are, therefore, less likely to become politically active and to be politically ambitious (see, for example, Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010). Yet, Coffé (2013) has shown that part of the gender gap in general political interest may be explained by the fact that interest in politics is primarily understood as interest in national politics, an issue in which men are more likely to be interested than women. Perceptions about what politics is thus influences women's interest. Also, compared with men, women tend to be more interested in local issues (Coffé, 2013) and such issues as education and health (Campbell and Winters 2008).

Common in all these explanations for the gender gap in political ambition are women's assessments of their own qualifications and capacities, as well as their perceptions about politics and the goals that can be realised through a political mandate. Indeed, perceptions about the political game, as well as the goals and focus within politics, influence not only the self-evaluation of one's own competences to function in politics (the first argument outlined earlier), but also one's willingness to engage in the competitive environment inherently linked to politics (the second argument) and one's level of political interest (the third argument). Hence, important for explaining the gender gap in political ambition are not only preferences, but also perceptions. In the next section, we explain how both preferences for and perceptions about the goals of a political career may influence levels of political ambition.

Goals of a political career: preferences and perceptions

Motivation can be approached either as an outcome-focused or a process-focused phenomenon (Touré-Tillery and Fishbach, 2014), referring to the extent to which people are motivated by the goals of an activity or by the activities themselves, respectively. In this article, we will conduct an outcome-focused analysis, paying attention to the *goals* that can be achieved through a political mandate rather than to the political activities themselves. The 'goal congruity framework', developed by Diekman et al (2010) in the context of the labour market, predicts that people will only engage in social roles that are able to realise the goals they want to pursue. Both the goal *preferences* of people (the goals they want to pursue) and their *perceptions* about the goal realisations associated with a particular social role (a job in this example) are thus relevant.

In the political context, a study by Schneider et al (2016) demonstrates that one's *preferences* for goals linked to a political mandate have a large impact on the likelihood

of aspiring to a political career (and thus on political ambition). The authors distinguish between three kinds of goals that can be realised through a political career: power goals, independence goals and communal goals. Power goals are about status, self-promotion in an electoral context and beyond, and recognition; independence goals refer to achievement, individualism and the demonstration of personal skills; while communal goals denote helping and caring for others, serving humanity, and working with people. Politics is often associated with competition, political power, strong leadership and independency (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Yet, some political activities can also fulfil communal goals, such as helping others and serving humanity (Schneider et al, 2016).

Preferences for goals that can be achieved through particular roles are expected to differ between women and men. Since women have historically occupied caretaking roles, they are more likely to adopt communal attributes (Eagly et al, 2004) and less likely to adopt agentic attributes, which results in women's lower preference for power goals compared with men. This is also confirmed by Schneider et al's (2016) study, which shows that women express a lower preference for power goals than men do. When it comes to preferences for independence goals and communal goals, no significant differences between men and women could be observed. In one of their experiments, Schneider et al (2016) furthermore reveal that framing a political career as fulfilling communal goals reduces the ambition gap. Their results clearly suggest that how people perceive a political career will influence their likelihood to pursue such a career. However, in their research, these perceptions are mostly considered at an aggregated level, and the authors remain vague about possible gender differences in perceptions about the goals typically pursued through a political career.

Yet, *perceptions* about a given social role are known to differ between women and men. Diekman et al (2010), for example, demonstrate that women prefer communal goals but believe that jobs in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics impede the realisation of these goals. Therefore, their motivation to take up these jobs is lower than men's. Looking at perceptions about the political process, Freedman (2007) has shown that these are deeply engrained by a culture that tends to reinforce traditional gender-role patterns and women's marginalisation in politics. The political sphere is often described as being gendered (Acker, 1990), implying that formal practices and policies construct divisions along gender lines, often both vertical and horizontal, with men in a majority in the most powerful positions. According to Marshall (1984), politics is an expression of male emotionality. Women choosing to enter a male-dominated sphere, such as politics, are considered as outsiders (Martin and Collinson, 2002). This suggests that women may, from their outsider perspective, perceive politics differently than men do. In particular, by relying on the gendered idea of the masculine ethos of politics involving a substantial amount of competition and the presentation of political behaviour as instrumental, we anticipate women to more likely believe that power and independence – typically more masculine characteristics – are important goals to achieve through a political career than men. By contrast, women may be less likely to believe that communal goals – typically corresponding to more feminine characteristics – are important when pursuing a career than men. Based on a laboratory experiment, Pate and Fox (2018) show that when politics is presented as an act of community service, the gender gap in political ambition disappears. While the gender gap mostly disappears because it decreases men's interest in running

for office, this suggests that gender differences in perceptions may explain gender differences in political ambition.

In sum, then, and in line with Diekman and Steinberg's (2013) 'goal congruity framework', we argue that it is crucial to simultaneously study preferences and perceptions if we want to get a full understanding of political ambition and gender differences therein. We expect that citizens' preferences for the goals attained by a political career will mainly have an impact on political ambition when perceptions about these goals are also high. In particular, we anticipate those scoring high on both preferences for and perceptions about goals typically attained by political careers – communal, power and independence goals – to have high political ambition, whereas we expect political ambition to be lower for citizens who believe that the goals they like cannot be attained through a political career.

Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and research outlined above, our hypotheses about gender differences in preferences and perceptions read as follows:

> H1 (preferences): women are more likely to pursue communal goals and less likely to pursue power and independence goals than men.

> H2 (perceptions): women are more likely to believe that a political mandate is mainly about achieving power and independence goals and less about achieving communal goals than men.

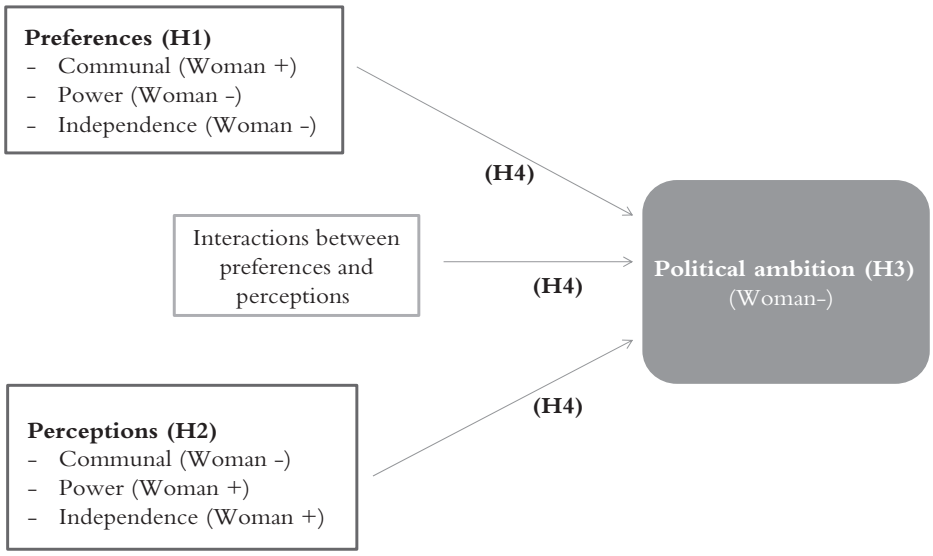
As said earlier, preferences and perceptions about political mandates are expected to influence citizens' levels of political ambition, which is known to be lower among women compared with men. We suggest that women's preferences and perceptions about political goals may be a driver of their low levels of political ambition. Indeed, given women's low preferences for power but perception that power is important in politics (see H1 and H2), women may display lower levels of political ambition compared with men. Similarly, their preferences for communal goals but perception that these are not important in politics may keep women from being politically ambitious. In other words, gender differences in preferences and perceptions about goals realised through a political mandate (see H1 and H2) may explain (part of) the gender gap in political ambition. Empirically, this means that once differences in preferences and perceptions (and the interaction between both) are taken into account, we would expect to see a decrease in the gender gap in political ambition.

Our hypotheses related to gender and political ambition, and the link between perceptions and preferences about political goals on political ambition, thus read as follows:

> H3: women will report lower levels of political ambition compared with men.

> H4: gender differences in preferences for and perceptions about goals realised through a political mandate (see H1 and H2) (and the interaction between both) will decrease the gender gap in political ambition.

Figure 1: Summary of hypotheses



Note: Presented signs indicate effect of woman (compared with man).

Our hypotheses are summarised in Figure 1.

Data and methodology

Data

To test our hypotheses, we rely on data from a survey that is conducted annually among students of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University (Belgium), which contains a large number of questions on a broad range of political and social themes. The survey was conducted in April 2020, and all students of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences ($N = 1{,}595$) received an invitation to participate in the online survey. After several reminders were sent to increase response rates, 385 respondents completed the survey (response rate = 24.14 per cent). To get a representative sample of the opinions of the students enrolled at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, the data were weighted by the field of study (communication science, conflict and development, political science, and sociology) and the year of study (bachelor or master) (weighting factors ranging from 0.61 to 2.73). Listwise deletion of observations with missing data on the independent variables was used (Allison, 2002). The final sample size of our multivariate analyses is 322.

Our sample of university students may be seen as a crucial confirmatory (least-likely) case to find a gender gap in political ambition. The students enrolled at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences are by default more likely to be politically involved and to have greater levels of political interest than students from other faculties.[1] Women students are also less likely to suffer from the so-called 'three-job problem' of combining a profession, a family and political activity (Matland and Montgomery,

2003). Access to higher education is relatively unrestricted in Belgium, which means that both men and women with ambition have the possibility to enter university.

The political context in Belgium also tends to be advantageous for women aspirants. Belgium is known for becoming increasingly women-friendly (Devroe et al, 2021), both on a general societal level and in the political sphere. It also has far-reaching quota regulations ensuring that both party elites and voters have become quite open to women candidates and representatives, resulting in a relatively high share of women in parliament and in government (even in prominent positions), who function as important role models for young girls and women. Finally, due to the consociational nature of policymaking in Belgium (Lijphart, 1969), affective polarisation (including rivalry and personal insults) (Iyengar et al, 2012) is supposed to be lower than, for example, the US, which tends to make politics more appealing to women.

Taken together, it seems reasonable to expect that the level of political ambition will be more evenly distributed among the men and women within our sample compared with the general population. Yet, considering Lawless and Fox's (2013) findings that a gender gap in political ambition still occurs even among young (aged 18–25) American 'potential candidates' (lawyers, business leaders, educators and political activists), as well as Davidson-Schmich's (2016) conclusion that a gender gap among potential aspirants persists even within parties using quotas, we still expect H3 to hold for our sample.

Finally, while students of faculties of political and social sciences are obviously not representative of the general population, university students and graduates constitute an important pool of future candidates (Lawless and Fox, 2013). Previous studies on nascent political ambition have also often restricted their samples to a social group expected to exhibit some ambition, typically delineated on the basis of profession or type of education (Lawless and Fox, 2013).

Variables

Dependent variable

To assess respondents' level of nascent political ambition, we use a question asking respondents to indicate how likely it is that they would ever run for political office (see also, for example, Fox and Lawless, 2005). This was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).[2]

Explanatory variables

The main focus of the analysis – gender – is a dichotomous variable, with the value of 0 for men and 1 for women respondents. We offered a third response option for those who do not identify with a particular gender, but because of the limited number of respondents not identifying with a particular gender ($N = 3$), they are not included in our analysis.

To measure *perceptions* about goals, respondents were given a list of goals for which they had to indicate to what extent they thought political representatives consider them as important (on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 [very unimportant] to 7 [very important]). To measure *preferences*, respondents received the same list of goals and were asked to what extent they felt personally attracted to these goals (on a seven-point scale going from 1 [does not appeal to me at all] to 7 [strongly appeals to

me]). We followed Schneider et al's (2016) wording and approach, and included the following goals: *communal goals* – 'doing something for society' and 'helping people with their problems' (correlations = .52 [preferences] and .72 [perceptions]); *power goals* – 'exercising power', 'stepping into the limelight' and 'gaining status' (Cronbach's Alpha = .77 [preferences] and .84 [perceptions]); *independence goals* – 'developing and realising your own ideas' and 'expressing your own opinion' (correlations = .53 [preferences] and .43 [perceptions]). The scales measuring preferences and perceptions are sum scales (divided by the number of items included in the scale).

Control variables

In the following multivariate analyses, we also include a series of socio-demographic and political control variables known to affect political ambition (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Lawless and Fox, 2013). Respondents' field of study are represented by four categories: communication science, conflict and development, political science, and sociology. Level of education is measured as a dichotomous variable distinguishing whether the student is following a bachelor's or master's degree. Next to the respondents' level of education, we also control for their mother's and father's level of education with a simple dichotomous variable (father and/or mother higher educated or not). Respondents' migrant background is measured by a dichotomous variable representing whether or not the respondent has at least one (grand)parent born abroad. Lastly, we control for respondents' level of political interest (a continuous variable ranging from 0 [not at all interested] to 10 [very interested]) and evaluation of one's own capacity. The latter measures to what extent respondents believe that they will have the necessary knowledge and skills to be a politician in the future (for example, after their studies and a few years of work experience). Answer categories ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).[3] Descriptive statistics, broken down by gender, for all control variables are available in Table A1 in the Online Appendix (available at: https://osf.io/u76wg).[4]

Results

Gender differences in preferences and perceptions

We first examine gender differences in preferences for and perceptions about different goals that may be pursued through a political career (H1 and H2). Table 1 presents average scores for *preferences*, operationalised as the extent to which respondents themselves find different goals attractive.

Table 1 reveals a clear pattern confirming H1. Women are more likely to be attracted by communal goals (though only 'helping people with their problems' reaches the level of statistical significance) than are men, and they are significantly less likely than men to be attracted to both power goals and independence goals. Moving on to *perceptions* about the goals that can be pursued through a political career, Table 2 shows that women differ significantly from men in their views about the communal goals that politicians pursue through their career.

In particular, women give on average a lower score for the relevance of 'doing something for society' and a slightly lower score for 'helping people with their problems' than men do. Women believe that communal goals are less important goals to pursue through a political career than men do. For the power goals and

Table 1: Average scores (standard deviation between brackets) on the question as to what extent respondents are personally attracted by goals that may be pursued through a political career

Item	Men	Women	Sign.
Communal	6.05 (.74)	6.25 (.68)	*
Doing something for society	6.24 (.82)	6.32 (.80)	
Helping people with their problems	5.86 (.92)	6.19 (.75)	**
Power	3.62 (1.25)	2.90 (1.11)	***
Exercising power	3.95 (1.68)	2.96 (1.27)	***
Stepping into the limelight	3.09 (1.42)	2.63 (1.22)	**
Gaining status	3.81 (1.64)	3.11 (1.47)	***
Independence	5.46 (.96)	4.96 (1.09)	***
Developing and realising your own ideas	5.57 (1.07)	5.12 (1.16)	**
Expressing your own opinion	5.37 (1.30)	4.79 (1.27)	**
N	117	205	

Notes: Answer categories ranged from 1 (does not appeal to me at all) to 7 (strongly appeals to me). Significance tests conducted through ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses, with gender as the only independent variable. Sig = significance. † $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2: Average scores (standard deviation between brackets) on the question as to what extent goals are important for political representatives

Item	Men	Women	Sign.
Communal	5.31 (.88)	4.97 (1.16)	*
Doing something for society	5.57 (.96)	5.16 (1.18)	**
Helping people with their problems	5.05 (1.02)	4.79 (1.30)	†
Power	4.85 (1.27)	4.91 (1.25)	
Exercising power	5.00 (1.42)	4.88 (1.34)	
Stepping into the limelight	4.64 (1.51)	4.77 (1.47)	
Gaining status	4.91 (1.45)	5.07 (1.46)	
Independence	5.51 (.94)	5.44 (.87)	
Developing and realising your own ideas	5.61 (1.11)	5.44 (.97)	
Expressing your own opinion	5.40 (1.20)	5.43 (1.06)	
N	117	205	

Notes: Answer categories ranged from 1 (very unimportant) to 7 (very important). Significance tests conducted through OLS regression analyses, with gender as the only independent variable. † $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

independence goals, no significant gender differences occur. We can thus only partially confirm H2.

Overall, it appears that women and men do indeed have different goals that they want to realise by a political mandate. While women are less likely to believe that communal goals can be achieved by a political mandate than are men, they do tend to like achieving such goals more than men do. Men are more likely to like achieving power and independence goals, but perceptions about these goals are – contrary to our expectations – similar for women and men.

Table 3: OLS regression analyses for political ambition

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Coef (std err)	Sign	Coef (std err)	Sign	Coef (std err)	Sign	Coef (std err)	Sign
Woman	–1.22 (.23)	***	–.52 (.19)	**	–.43 (.19)	*	–.44 (.19)	*
Migrant background			–.34 (.23)		–.33 (.22)		–.28 (.22)	
Higher-educated parents			–.43 (.20)	*	–.46 (.19)	*	–.41 (.19)	*
Subject of study (ref: communication)								
Sociology			.40 (.23)	†	.46 (.23)	*	.47 (.23)	*
Conflict and development			.65 (.37)	†	.77 (.36)	*	.81 (.37)	*
Political science			.38 (.23)	†	.43 (.23)	†	.40 (.23)	†
Master			–.60 (.19)	**	–.49 (.19)	*	–.48 (.19)	*
Political interest			.23 (.04)	***	.20 (.05)	***	.22 (.05)	***
Capacity			.38 (.10)	***	.36 (.10)	***	.36 (.10)	***
Preference communal					.11 (.13)		47 (.51)	
Preference power					.20 (.07)	**	.33 (.27)	
Preference independence					.12 (.08)		.69 (.36)	†
Perception communal					–.10 (.09)		.41 (.68)	
Perception power					–.13 (.08)	†	–.04 (.16)	
Perception independence					–.02 (.10)		–.82 (.34)	*
Preference * perception communal							–.08 (.10)	
Preference * perception power							–.03 (.05)	
Preference * perception independence							.15 .06	*
Constant	3.91 (.20)	***	.82 (.41)	*	.39 (.95)		1.58 (3.87)	
R squared	.10		.42		.44		.45	

Notes: $N = 322$. Coef = coefficient; std err = standard error. † $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Gender differences in political ambition

Having described gender differences in preferences for and perceptions about various goals pursued through political careers, we now move on to investigating political ambition and gender differences therein. Table 3 presents four models with political ambition as the dependent variable: (1) a baseline model including only respondents' gender as the independent variable (test of H3); (2) a model adding our control variables known to affect political ambition; (3) a model adding respondents' preferences for and perceptions about the goals that can be pursued through a political career (test of H4); and (4) a model including interactions between preferences for and perceptions about each of the goals (test of H4).

The results in Model 1 show a significant gender gap, with women being significantly less likely to pursue a political career than are men. Even among a sample of political and social sciences students, who may be considered as a least-likely case,

a gender gap occurs (mean [scale 1–7]: women = 2.69; men = 3.91). H3 can thus be confirmed.

Model 2 confirms the significant gender gap in nascent political ambition, though the level of significance of the effect decreases (predicted probability [scale 1–7]: women = 2.89; men = 3.40). Part of the gender difference may thus be explained by some differences in socio-demographic characteristics, field of study, political interest and perceptions about one's own capacity. The latter two have particularly strong and positive effects on political ambition. Furthermore, students in the fields of sociology, conflict and development, and political science report marginally significantly higher levels of political ambition compared with students in the field of communication science. In addition, master's students and those with higher-educated parents tend to have lower levels of political ambition than do bachelor's students.

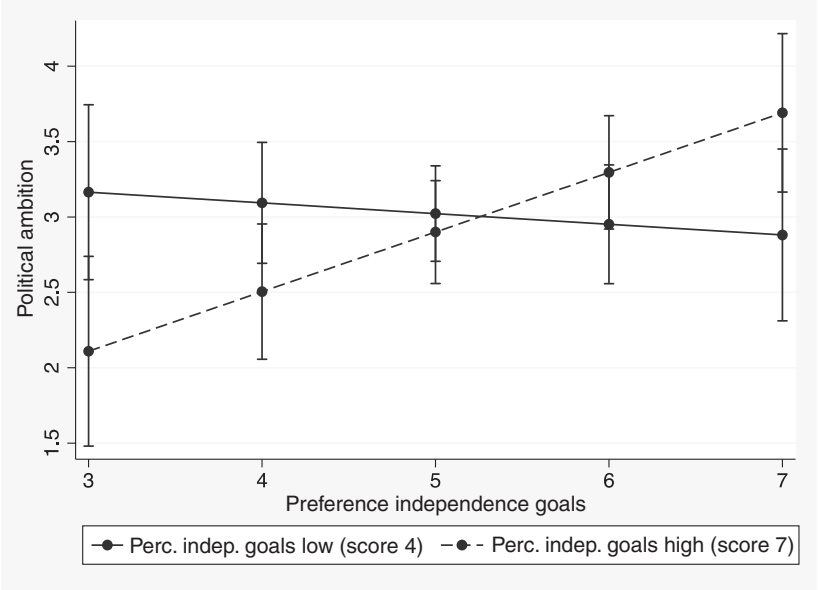
Turning to Model 3, we find that the gender gap remains, with the coefficient of gender remaining similar compared with Model 2 (predicted probability [scale 1–7]: women = 2.91; men = 3.35). This suggests that preferences for and perceptions about goals matter little for explaining the gender gap. We thus have to reject H4. Preferences for and perceptions about goals do, however, have some impact, particularly for power goals. Those who prefer power goals are significantly more likely to be politically ambitious. By contrast, perceptions that political representatives consider power as an important goal slightly decrease the likelihood of being politically ambitious. Preferences for and perceptions about the other goals (independence and communal goals) do not have a significant effect.

Finally, Model 4 includes interactions between preferences for and perceptions about each of the three goals. There is only one significant positive interaction, namely, for independence goals. Those scoring high on both preferences for and perceptions about independence goals attained by political careers report higher levels of political ambition, whereas political ambition is lower for respondents who believe that the independence goals they like cannot be attained through a political career. This clearly indicates that high levels of both preferences for and perceptions about independence goals reinforce one another, as suggested by the 'goal congruity theory'. The gender effect remains the same (predicted probability [scale 1–7]: women = 2.91; men = 3.35). To get a substantive understanding of the interaction, Figure 2 presents the predicted probabilities of political ambition by preferences for and perceptions about independence goals.

Figure 2 shows that the effect of preferences for independence goals is the strongest and most positive among those who believe that independence goals are considered important by those pursuing a political career. Political ambition is highest (score = 3.69) among those with both high levels of perceptions about independence goals and high levels of preferences for independence goals. It is lowest (score = 2.11) for those who believe that independence goals are important for political representatives but who do not have a preference for these goals themselves.

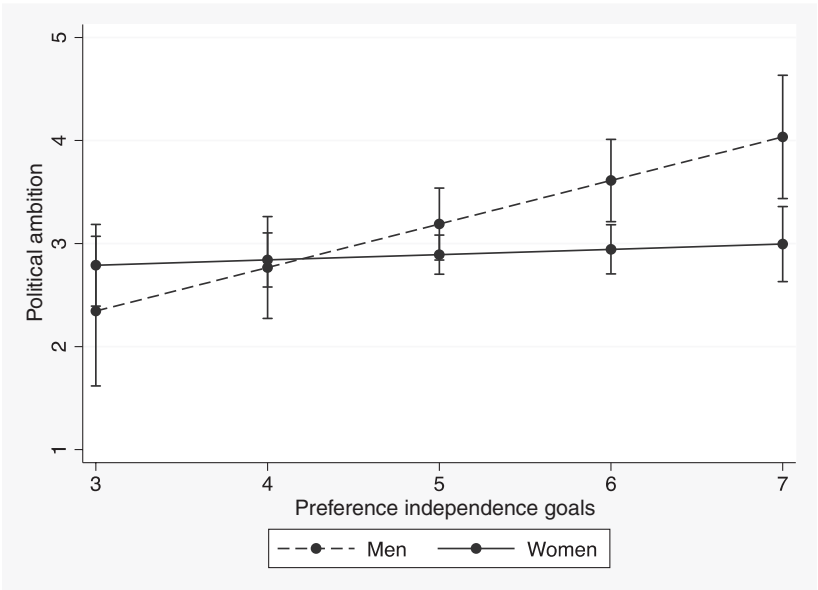
Finally, and while we did not formulate specific hypotheses about this, we were interested in knowing whether the explanatory patterns of preferences for and perceptions about political goals (and the interactions between both) found in Models 3 and 4 in Table 3 earlier were similar for women and men. To that end, we empirically explored gender interactions with the preferences for and perceptions about each goal (and the interactions between both). We did not find any significant three-way interactions (gender * perceptions * preferences). We did, however, find two significant two-way interactions: one between gender and preferences for

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for political ambition according to preferences for and perceptions about independence goals



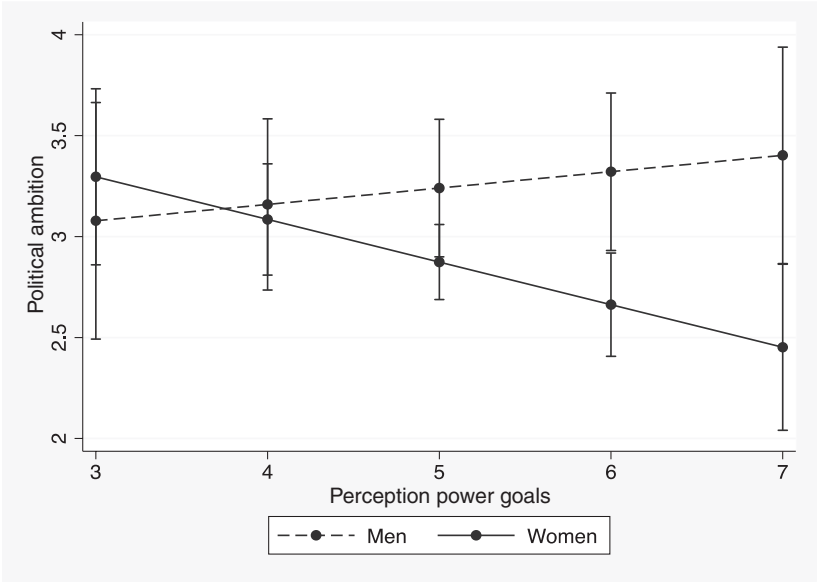
Notes: The figure only includes the values for preferences with a reasonable number of respondents ($N > 6$) and scores 4 (the lowest score with a reasonable number [$N > 6$] of respondents) and 7 (the highest score) for perceptions about independence goals.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for political ambition among women and men according to preferences for independence goals



Notes: The figure only includes the values (for preferences for independence goals) with a reasonable number of respondents ($N > 6$).

Figure 4: Predicted probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for political ambition among women and men according to perceptions about power goals



Notes: The figure only includes the values (for perceptions about power goals) with a reasonable number of respondents ($N > 6$).

independence goals; and one between gender and perceptions about power. The results of the analyses are presented in Table A2 in the Online Appendix (available at: https://osf.io/u76wg). Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the results for preferences for independence goals and perceptions about power goals, respectively.

Figure 3 shows that preferences for independence goals matter positively and significantly for men's political ambition, while they do not make a difference for women. Indeed, women's political ambition is virtually the same irrespective of their levels of preference for independence goals. By contrast, men's level of political ambition is significantly and positively affected by their preferences for independence goals. In substantive terms, those who do not like independence goals have a score on the political ambition scale of 2.3, compared with 4.0 for those who have the highest score on liking independence goals.

Figure 4, which presents the interaction between gender and perceptions about power goals, reveals that these perceptions have a stronger effect among women compared with men. The effect is negative among women: the more that women believe that power is an important goal for politicians, the lower their levels of political ambition. In substantive terms, women who are the least likely to believe that power is an important goal when pursuing a political career have a score on the political ambition scale of 3.3, compared with a score of 2.5 among those who are the most likely to believe that power goals are important. This means that the perception of politics as an arena in which the realisation of power goals is sought has a different effect on men's and women's political ambition. Men who estimate power goals to be important in a political career are more likely to exhibit political ambition compared with women who think that these goals are important for politicians.

Conclusion

The gender gap in nascent political ambition is a decisive factor in explaining the political under-representation of women (Lawless and Fox, 2010; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Allen and Cutts, 2020; Dahl and Nyrup, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to understand why women tend to be less likely to aspire to political office compared with men (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Kjaer and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). Our study aimed to add to the study of gender and political ambition by: (1) focusing on gender differences in preferences for and perceptions about goals typical of a political career; and (2) investigating to what extent the combination of preferences and perceptions helps explain gender differences in political ambition.

Using data from a survey conducted among students of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University (Belgium), a number of important findings emerge. First, even among this least-likely population of students in social sciences in a relatively women-friendly political environment, a gender gap in political ambition can be observed, with women showing significantly lower levels of political ambition compared with men (H3). This gap is robust and strong.

Second, our results reveal substantial gender differences in preferences for and perceptions about goals pursued by political careers. Women have higher levels of interest in communal goals than do men but are significantly less interested than men in both power and independence goals (H1). Gender differences also occur in *perceptions* about the goals that politicians pursue through their political career, at least for communal goals, with women being significantly more likely to believe that communal goals are not typically pursued through a political mandate than are men (H2). No significant gender differences were found for the perceptions about power and independence goals.

Third, preferences for and perceptions about goals do matter, in particular, those related to power goals. Students who prefer power goals are significantly more likely to report higher levels of political ambition, and the perception that power is important also slightly increases the likelihood of being politically ambitious. Yet, despite the effects of the preferences for and perceptions about power goals on political ambition and the gender differences in these preferences for power goals, our explanatory OLS regressions indicate that they do not play a central role in explaining the gender gap in political ambition, thus rejecting H4. However, analyses including gender interactions suggest that preferences for independence goals and perceptions about power goals have a different effect among men and women. First, women's political ambition is independent of their levels of preference for independence goals, while such preferences positively affect men's political ambition. Second, perceptions that politicians mainly pursue power goals have a stronger and more negative effect on women's political ambition than men's.

Our findings have several important implications. First, we surveyed respondents in Belgium, which has far-reaching gender quotas requiring half of the places on candidate lists to be occupied by women. Although individual political attitudes, especially among women, may be affected by gender quotas and the related higher representation of women (Geissel and Hust, 2005), quotas do not seem to result in gender-equal political ambition, even about two decades after the introduction of the first quota law. The findings are in line with Davidson-Schmich's (2016) results showing a gender gap among potential aspirants, even within German parties using quotas. The fact that young women continue to report lower levels of nascent political

ambition compared with men implies that political parties have to actively search for women candidates (Cross, 2019). Encouragement to run for office continues to be crucial, even in countries with quota systems and a (relatively) high level of women's representation.

Second, our findings suggest that the way in which a political mandate is framed and perceived is critical for political ambition. We posited – and supported empirically – that women often look at politics from an outsider perspective and tend to rely more on the traditional masculine ethos of politics, with a substantial amount of competition and power battles. We believe that the recent growing influx of women in politics may modify the outsider stance of women and may increase the emphasis on communal goals in the perceptions about politics, especially among women.

Third, our explanatory analyses highlight that one's level of political interest is a key determinant of political ambition. Therefore, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of the factors that may explain why women have lower levels of political interest compared with men, including an improved understanding of the socialisation process through which girls and women have the impression that politics is a man's game and thus not for them. Given our exclusive focus on individual explanations, we may be missing possible structural biases and barriers to women's officeholding, which can, in turn, shape individual-level perceptions. Hence, structural and institutional barriers or opportunities should be taken into account, as these may inform men's and women's responses to questions gauging political ambition, including nascent political ambition.

Since we wanted to gain an overall understanding of women's levels of political ambition, we did not specify a policy level in this study, but it might be that the gender ambition gap differs between levels of policymaking. The gender gap could, for example, be lower at the local level, as perceptions about the goals that can be achieved at the local level may differ, and may be more communal focused, than perceptions about those at other levels of policymaking. The local level is also more visible for women, and women have been found to be more interested in local political issues than in national or international political issues (Coffé, 2013). Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to investigate whether gender differences in political ambition differ between policy levels (and whether preferences for and perceptions about political careers are similar across these levels).

Finally, as our study focused on one country, future research could usefully investigate whether the gender patterns in political ambition, as well as in perceptions for and preferences about goals typically attained through political careers, also occur in other contexts. In addition, as our study relies on a sample of students in social sciences, future research could explore whether similar patterns occur among the general population or whether they are specific to early-career/advanced-degree citizens only.

Notes

[1] This also means that our sample may be more likely to be open towards a political career, as they are likely to have more information about political careers than the average citizen.

[2] We are thus interested in the ambition to run for political office, which can be seen as a very demanding type of political engagement. In focusing on this type of engagement,

we leave aside a variety of other ways to engage in politics, including participation in advocacy groups, non-governmental organisations or political parties.

[3] As women are known to have lower levels of political trust – known to relate to political engagement – we ran additional analyses including political trust as a control variable (see, for example, Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010). As the effect was not significant in our multivariate model and including the variable did not affect our main conclusions, we decided not to include the variable in the analyses presented later.

[4] As one may expect, the variables of political ambition, political interest and self-evaluation of capacity do correlate. Correlations are: .54 for political ambition and political interest; .49 for political ambition and self-evaluation of capacity; and .60 for political interest and self-evaluation of capacity. We tested the models for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF). With all values lower than 5 (highest value was 2.18), it did not show any problem of multicollinearity.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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