

Gender gaps in political ambition on different levels of policy making.

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Paper prepared for presentation at the European Conference on Politics and Gender

Ljubljana, 6-8 July 2022

Abstract | Previous research has extensively documented that women consistently report lower levels of nascent political ambition than men. The aim of this study is to investigate whether these gender differences in ambition occur to the same extent across local, national and European levels of policy making. We expect that the gender gap will be smaller at the local level (compared to the national and European level). We present several arguments for this expectation, including (1) differences in the substantive issues dealt with, (2) differences in resources needed to campaign, and (3) differences in the risks associated with taking up a mandate at the different levels. Using original data collected among a representative sample of Flemish citizens aged between 18 and 35 (N=1,000), our results demonstrate a significant gender gap across all levels of policy making, though it is slightly less pronounced at the local level. that the gender gap in ambition is only slightly smaller at the local level. We also find that political attitudes (the pleasure to convince others, political interest and the evaluation of one's own capacity) have a crucial impact on the gender gap, regardless of the level of policy making.

Keywords: gender, political ambition, political representation, multilevel politics, second-order elections

1. Introduction

Women are underrepresented in most elected assemblies across the world, and research has suggested that the supply of potential candidates is an important bottleneck in the representation of women (see for example Kjaer & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). One of the main factors influencing the supply of candidates is individual political ambition (Moncrief, 1999; Norris & Lovenduski, 1993). In the current study, we are particularly interested in *nascent* political ambition¹, 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. Nascent political ambition indicates the intention to run for office without reference to a particular candidacy for a specific election and is a necessary condition for expressed ambition (Bernhard, Shames, & Teele, 2021). Research has consistently shown that women have lower levels of nascent political ambition than men (Allen & Cutts, 2020; Coffé, Devroe, Vandeleene, & Wauters, 2022; Dahl & Nystrup, 2021; Kanthak & Woon, 2015; Lawless & Fox, 2010), which causes problems for the recruitment of women for a political mandate.

However, most existing research examining gender differences in political ambition, measures political ambition in general without specifying particular policy levels or issues. Insights offered by feminist theory, however, argue that such a general measure is biased, as “politics” is more than just national and/or partisan politics, and also includes local politics and European politics. To get a broader and more detailed understanding of the gender gap in political ambition, the research question motivating our study thus reads: **To what extent do women and men’s levels of political ambition differ on the local, national and European level?**

To answer our research question, we organised an original online survey among a representative sample of young Flemish citizens (aged 18-35).² Our sample thus focuses on young people, where political ambition is most relevant and includes a broader group of respondents in terms of educational and occupational background compared with many previous studies, often based on data collected among university students and/or citizens with higher levels of education or occupation (Coffé et al., 2022; Lawless & Fox, 2013; Shames, 2017). As such, we hope to get an in-depth understanding of gender differences in political ambition among the whole young population.

¹ *Nascent* ambition can be distinguished from *expressive* ambition. While expressive ambition refers to the actual decision to stand as a candidate in a particular election which is heavily influenced by the opportunity structure of that specific election and the encouragement of others, nascent political ambition denotes a more general interest in office-seeking. It is about the intention to run for office someday, without reference to a particular candidacy for a specific election (Fox & Lawless, 2005).

² Flanders is the largest region of the federal state Belgium.

We review three main arguments why we expect the gender gap in political ambition to be lower at the local level: (1) differences in the substantive issues dealt with, (2) differences in resources needed to campaign, and (3) differences in risks associated with taking up a mandate at the different levels. Our results provide evidence of significant gender gaps in ambition for *all* levels of policy making, though the difference is slightly smaller at the local level. All gaps also cease to be significant once political attitudes are controlled for.

2. Gender and political ambition on different levels of policy making

A necessary prerequisite to aspire to a political office is at least some level of (nascent) political ambition, and research consistently finds a clear and strong gender gap in political ambition: women tend to have lower levels of such ambition than men (Allen & Cutts, 2020; Coffé et al., 2022; Dahl & Nyrup, 2021; Kanthak & Woon, 2015; Lawless & Fox, 2010). As rational actors, women, just like men, consider whether the circumstances are conducive to their entry in politics. In their calculus, several structural and individual factors play a role and interact with each other (Krook, 2010; Piscopo & Kenny, 2020), resulting in women's lower levels of political ambition.

On the structural level, traditional sex-role socialisation still negatively affect women's ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2005; Galais, 2018), but also media sexism (Haraldsson & Wängnerud, 2019) and the lack of role models (Ladam, Harden, & Windett, 2018) – indicating a narrow openness of the political system towards women candidates – are also known to have an impact on women's political ambition.

On the individual level and because of enduring gender stereotypes (Pruyers & Blais, 2017), women are known to believe that they are less qualified to run for office than men, even when having similar qualifications (Dahl & Nyrup, 2021; Lawless & Fox, 2010). In addition, the political context is not appealing in many women's eyes (Eagly, 1987; Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008). Politics remains a competitive and conflictual context where 'agentic' attributes such as self-confidence, independence and dominance prevail. While men are thought to be more likely to possess agentic attributes, women tend to be described rather by 'communal' attributes such as kindness and sensitivity (Conroy & Green, 2020), and to be conflict avoidant and election averse (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2017; Kanthak & Woon, 2015). This conflict avoidance and election aversion are likely to dampen women's political ambition (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; Kanthak & Woon, 2015). Moreover, women tend to have a less extravert personality which is often positively associated with nascent political career ambitions (Dynes, Hassell, & Miles, 2019). They are also inclined to have lower levels of political interest, and previous studies have emphasised political interest as a key driver for political ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2005).

Common in the research on gender and political ambition discussed above, is that ‘political’ is considered in a general way. Scholars have been arguing that general indicators referring to ‘politics’ are gender-biased as ‘politics’ predominantly evokes the idea of national and partisan politics (Coffé, 2013; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004), which are conceived as being “unfriendly environments for women” (Renshaw, 2012, p. 197). Therefore, and given the growing importance of multilevel governance across the globe, we want to move beyond a general measure of political ambition and disentangle the many facets of political ambition by looking at ambition on different levels of policy making. Studies on the gender gap in political interest have highlighted that the size of this gender gap differs depending on the policy levels investigated. In her study using UK data, Coffé (2013), for example, empirically demonstrated that, when asked specifically about different political arenas, women declare similar levels of interest in local politics than men, while a gender gap appears when asked about national and international politics. Similarly and focusing on the US, Verba et al. (1997) did not find a gender difference when studying high levels of interest in local politics but showed that men are somewhat more likely than women to be very interested in national politics. Sanchez-Vitores (2019) found evidence in an international dataset covering a dozen of European countries that the level where the “closest social issues” are discussed, namely the local level, appeals more to women than national politics.

Considering these differences, we may also expect the gender gap in political ambition to differ depending on the level of policy making, in particular the local, national and European levels of policy making. Existing research on policy-making, campaigning and the costs-benefits associated with a political mandate on the different levels leads us to anticipate a smaller gender gap on the local level, compared with the national and European level. In what follows, we review three main arguments why the gender gap in political ambition is expected to be smallest at the local level: (1) differences in the substantive issues dealt with, (2) differences in resources needed to campaign, (3) differences in risks associated with taking up a mandate at the different levels.

Firstly, the nature of the issues dealt with at the local, national and European level differ, and women and men may be more interested in some over others. The local arena is the ‘closest politically’ and the first level of policy making that citizens encounter (Rodden, 2004). It is the level most closely linked to day-to-day preoccupations, such as the provision of public services or the solution of conflicts within the community (Stokes, 2005). Given women’s gender socialisation, the substantial pressure they face to specialise in the private sphere, and their greater likelihood of having caring roles and being involved in the community compared with men, women may feel more attracted to the local level of policy making than men (Coffé, 2013; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Sánchez-Vitores, 2019). Women may – by

contrast – be less interested in foreign affairs as it is perceived as being more distant from citizens’ everyday concerns (Bernstein, 2005). Men may – in their turn – be more interested in (inter)national politics and offices because of stereotypical beliefs that the typical masculine personality traits are crucial to handle (inter)national policy issues (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Previous research did indeed find that men were more interested in national and international politics compared with women (e.g. Coffé, 2013; Verba et al., 1997).

Secondly, there are differences in the resources needed to plan and pay an electoral campaign at the different policy levels. Owing to the smaller scale of local elections (which are organised per municipality), the number of voters is lower than in the larger districts of elections for the national parliament or for the European Parliament.³ As the number of people a campaign aims to target is lower in a local context, campaign expenses will be lower as well. Moreover, Belgian formal campaign regulations prescribe a spending cap which is normally much lower in local elections than in national elections (Put, Maddens, & Smulders, 2015). In addition, social distance is much smaller in local politics, rendering social contacts rather than expensive campaigns an important source for preference votes (Thijssen, Wauters, & Van Erkel, 2018). In sum, campaign expenses tend to be lower in local elections. As both resources and motivation are conducive to enhancing the prospects of a candidacy (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995), having to invest fewer resources may make the local policy level more appealing to women than other levels of policy making. Women have indeed in general fewer financial resources and fewer experiences associated with fundraising than men (Bernhard et al., 2021; Buckley & Mariani, 2021), and research indicates that men spend more money on campaigning than women (Giebler & Wüst, 2011). As such, women’s access to resources may constrain their political ambition for more costly policy levels

A third argument refers to differences in risks associated with taking up a mandate at the different levels. Media coverage tends to be lower for local elections and for local politics in general, especially in the smaller, rural municipalities (Tolley, 2019). This makes that there is more room for failure, far away from the cameras. For women who tend to be more risk averse than men (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2017; Kanthak & Woon, 2015), this might lower the threshold to aspire a political career at that level. In addition, while a national and European elected mandate implies giving up one’s job for a period of at least five years with uncertainty whether it will be prolonged or not, a mandate as local councillor can be exercised without necessarily completely giving up one’s current

³ In the Belgian list-PR system, the constituency for the national level corresponds to the province. For the European parliament, the constituency responds to the whole respective regions.

job (Allen, 2012). This is especially pertinent for women. Bernhard et al. (2021) indeed found that having a breadwinning-responsibility for a majority of the household income had a negative impact on women's political ambition. Next, in a multilevel polity, political careers follow particular patterns (Borchert, 2011). Often, the local level functions as a springboard to a mandate at a higher level (Buckley, Mariani, McGing, & White, 2015). Once all goes well with an elected mandate at the local level, politicians start to aspire a mandate at a higher level (Stolz, 2010). This is especially the case for people who want to avoid risks and who are less self-confident. As we demonstrated earlier, women are more numerous among this group of people.

Based on the arguments presented above, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: The gender gap in political ambition is lower on the local level than on the national and European level

In addition to the three main arguments presented above, other theoretical insights and arguments may however lead to different or contradictory expectations.

First, research has made the difference between first-order and second-order elections. Second-order elections are generally defined as elections that determine the composition of offices that are estimated to be less important (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), typically elections at the supra-national level (European elections) or at the subnational level (local elections). As the stakes of second-order elections are lower (and hence also the media coverage) and the link between election results and policy more fuzzy, there is a weaker intrinsic motivation to become involved (Kostelka, Blais, & Gidengil, 2019; Söderlund, Wass, & Blais, 2011). It requires more effort to get involved in these second-order elections (Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen, & Hansen, 2019; Söderlund et al., 2011), especially for women. Hence, we would expect women to be less likely to campaign on the local and European level compared with the national level. Conversely, however, the lower media coverage associated with second-order elections might be appealing to women as they are more averse of (open) conflict and competition as it is often seen in the media (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). If this argument would hold, we would thus expect women to be less likely to campaign on the national level compared with the local and European level.

A final argument or expectation starts from the presence of role models in politics, which is known to be a trigger for political ambition (Childs, 2008; Norris, Lovenduski, & Campbell, 2004). Seeing (many) representatives similar to oneself in office renders one's own presence in politics more acceptable and may encourage nascent political ambition. Looking at women's representation on the local level, international research is inconclusive and suggests great variation in local politics across places and

positions (Murray, 2010a, 2010b; Verge, 2010). In the Flemish case, the percentage of women local councillors roughly follows the figures for the national elected assemblies (Devroe, Erzeel, & Meier, 2020), which may suggest that women's levels of ambition may not substantially differ across policy levels in this specific context.

3. Data and measurement

To answer our research questions and study the gender gaps in nascent political ambition on the local, national and European level of policy making, we rely on the 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey. Data were collected via an original internet-based survey developed by the research team. The survey contained a number of questions related to respondents' political ambition, political interest and attitudes (see *infra*), and socio-demographic characteristics. The survey was conducted in December 2021-January 2022 among a representative sample of Flemish citizens aged 18-35. Respondents were drawn from Bilendi's internet-based access panel, which is the largest online panel in Flanders with about 150,000 potential respondents.⁴ An invitation to participate was sent to 4232 respondents, of which 1276 agreed to participate.

1,000 respondents (546 women, 454 men) completed the survey. Given that we are interested in nascent political ambition, we exclude respondents who have been previously candidate or elected in an election (regression analyses including those who have been previously elected or candidate are included in the appendix), resulting in a final sample of 827 respondents.

Our analysis is situated in the Flemish context, which is known to be relatively women-friendly and could therefore function as a least likely case for a gender gap in political ambition (Devroe, Erzeel, Meier, & Wauters, 2021). The political culture is consociational, which dampens the effects of the worldwide growing affective polarisation (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). As women are known to be conflict avoidant and averse, this context may be less likely to push women back from politics than contexts with strong polarisation and conflict. Moreover, increasingly far-reaching gender quotas regulations paved the way already in the 1990s to the entry of many women in politics (Meier, 2012) on electoral lists first, then in the parliaments and even up to the most visible cabinet positions in most recent years. However, despite the growing presence of women politicians, gender parity is not reached (yet?) in the elected assemblies at any policy making level, from the municipal councils until

⁴ Although it is difficult to determine how well the online panel members represent the general population, we tried to maximize their representativeness. Quotas were set for the gender and the level of education of the respondents.

the Belgian delegation to the European Parliament. There thus still is a gender gap in descriptive representation, possibly partly caused by a similar gap in political ambition.

In the context of this study focusing specifically on differences in ambition between policy making levels, Flanders/Belgium is also a least likely case for a gender gap because of its relatively small territory and its statute of European capital. The reasonable distance between any place in Flanders and Brussels, where the national parliament is based and where the main work for the European Parliament is still done, allows any citizen living in Flanders to consider a political career at the national/European level without that it entails a lot of travelling or even a move to another country. Distance to the assembly (or the subjective understanding of it) has been demonstrated to be more detrimental to the political ambition of women than men (Dodeigne, 2015). Women tend to be more reluctant than men to engage in politics when the travel costs in terms of time and quality of life are higher, due to the family burden still weighing more on women's shoulders. In the Flemish context, no one has to be 'sent away from home' if elected in the national or European Parliament. As distance does not matter in this context, Flanders presents an ideal case to test differences in political ambition across policy levels.

Dependent Variables

To assess respondents' level of nascent political ambition, we use a question asking to indicate how likely it is that they will ever run for political office on different levels of policy making (local, national and European level). This was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).

Independent Variables

The main focus of the analysis, *gender*, is a dichotomous variable taking a value of 0 for men and 1 for women.

In the multivariate analyses below, we also include a series of common sociodemographic and political control variables known to affect political ambition (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Morales, 2009; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). *Education* is represented by three categories and refers to the highest level of education that respondents achieved: lower than high school (ref. category), high school and higher level of education (higher than high school). The *employment* measure distinguishes those who are currently (1) studying, (2) employed, and (3) unemployed and other employment status (ref. category). *Age* is a continuous variable. *Family situation* is coded into three categories and

distinguishes (1) respondents who are married or living as married, (2) respondents who are still living with their parents, and (3) respondents who are single or living together with friends (ref. category). We also include a variable measuring whether the respondents (1) have children (0) or not. A final sociodemographic characteristic measures whether or not at least one of the respondents' grandparents was born in Belgium, which allows us to capture the migration status of the respondents. It takes the value of 1 when at least one of the respondents' grandparents was not born in Belgium (value 0 otherwise).

In addition to sociodemographic characteristics, we introduce various political characteristics. Party membership is a dichotomous variable distinguishing respondents who are member of a political party (1) from those who are not (0). We also measure the extent to which respondents were politically socialised during their teenage years. The question asks to what extent politics was discussed within the respondents' families during their teenage years. Answer categories range from (1) very little to (5) very often. Next, we include a variable asking respondents to what extent they agree with the statement "I like trying to convince people of my political opinions." as a measure of *conflict avoidance*. Answer categories range from (1) completely disagree to (5) completely agree. Respondents' level of political interest is measured through a continuous variable ranging from 0 (not at all interested) to 10 (very interested). The evaluation of one's own *political capacity* 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).

Descriptive statistics broken down by gender for all independent variables are available in Table A in the Appendix. The multivariate analyses presented below are Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions. We also ran ordered logit models (see appendix), but as the results were substantively the same as those from OLS regressions, we decided to present the latter.

4. Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 describes gender differences in means for the measures of political ambition.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Political Ambition Variables (N Women: 474; N Men: 353)

	Women		Men		Gender gap	Sign. Test ^a
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Local Level Ambition	2.64	1.62	3.02	1.67	0.38	**
National Level Ambition	2.46	1.58	2.97	1.70	0.51	***
European Level Ambition	2.34	1.65	2.84	1.89	0.50	***

Source: 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey

^a Significance tests conducted through linear regression analyses only including gender.

*** p < .001 ** p < .01 *p < .05 (two-tailed).

The data indicate significant differences between women and men with regard to political ambition on all levels of policy making, with men scoring significantly higher than women. The well-known gender gap in political ambition thus occurs for all levels of policy making. The gender difference is, however, less outspoken (lower levels of significance) for the local level compared with the national and European levels. Both women and men score highest on ambition for the local level, and lowest on ambition for the European level. For women, T-tests (see Table B in the appendix) reveal that the differences between the ambition on the different levels of policy making are all statistically significant ($p < .05$). For men, the differences in political ambition between the different levels of policy making are not statistically significant at the 95%-level. The differences in political ambition between the different levels of policy making are thus more outspoken for women compared with men.

The gender differences in political ambition shown in Table 2 may, however, be explained by gender differences in sociodemographic characteristics and political attitudes. The descriptive information related to these variables (see Table A in Appendix) reveals that men and women differ significantly, in particular in terms of political characteristics. On average, women are less likely to be a member of a political party, enjoy convincing others of their own opinion, have lower levels of political interest and assess their own political capacities significantly lower than men.

The multivariate analyses presented hereafter will investigate the extent to which these gender differences in sociodemographic resources and political attitudes can account for gender gaps in political ambition.

Multivariate Sociodemographic Analyses

Table 2 presents a multivariate analysis controlling for sociodemographic characteristics for each of the three dependent variables.

Table 2 Results Sociodemographic Linear Regression Analyses of Political Ambition on Local, National and European Level (N: 827)

	Local		National		European	
	B	Std. Err.	B	Std. Err.	B	Std. Err.
Woman	-.40 **	.12	-.52 ***	.12	-.49 ***	.12
Education (<i>ref.</i> : Lower than high school)						
High school	.36	.19	.05	.19	-.13	.20
Higher level of education	.52 **	.20	.13	.20	.03	.21
Employment status (<i>ref.</i> : not employed)						
Student	-.05	.24	-.03	.24	-.06	.26
Employed	.01	.21	.02	.20	-.10	.22
Age	.01	.02	-.01	.02	.00	.02
Family situation (<i>ref.</i> : single or living with friends)						
Living with parents	-.06	.17	-.23	.17	-.54 **	.18
Married	-.08	.17	-.14	.17	-.39 *	.18
Children	.17	.18	.31	.18	.02	.19
Non-Belgian (Grand)Parents	.06	.12	.26 *	.12	.49 ***	.13
Constant	2.50 ***	.50	3.26 ***	.50	3.10 ***	.53
R Square	.03		.04		.05	

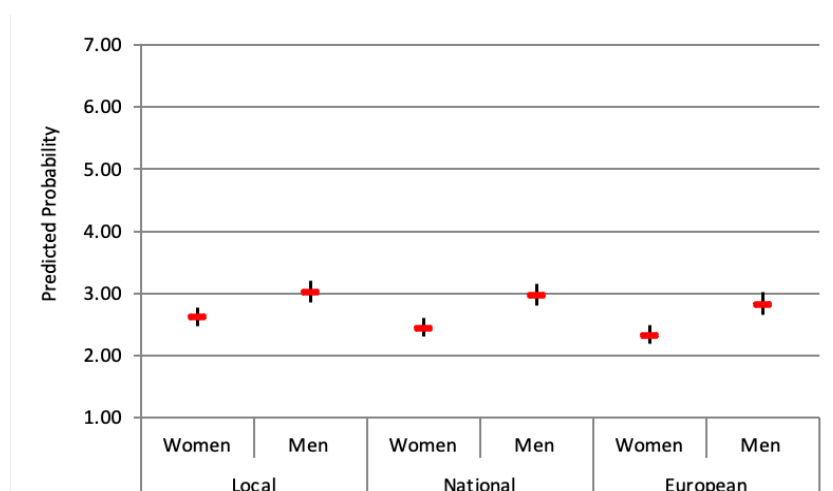
Source: 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey; Notes: *** p <.001 ** p <.01 *p<.05 (two-tailed).

Overall, the results of the sociodemographic analyses on the gender effect mirror those of the descriptive analyses presented in Table 2. Given the relatively limited gender differences in socio-economic background of our sample of 18–35-year-olds (see Table A), it is not surprising that socio-economic characteristics matter little. It is also in line with previous research suggesting that gender

differences in political engagement can be mostly explained by political attitudes (rather than socio-economic characteristics) (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010).

For all levels of policy making, men score higher on political ambition than women *ceteris paribus*. Similar to the descriptive results, the gender effect is least strong for the local level, suggesting that the gender gap is the smallest – though still significant – on the local level. This is also shown in Figure 1, which presents the predicted probabilities for women and men (keeping all other variables at their mean) for political ambition on the different levels of policy making among women and men. Women have an average score of 2.63 for political ambition on the local level compared with 3.03 among men. The scores are 2.98 and 2.46 for the national level, and 2.84 and 2.34 for the European level, for men and women respectively. These are virtually the same results as in the descriptive analysis.

Figure 1 Predicted Probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for Political Ambition According to Gender (Based on Sociodemographic Model)



Briefly shifting the attention to the link between sociodemographic characteristics and political ambition, we see little significant effects besides gender. Those who attained a higher level of education (post high school) are more likely to have political ambition on the local level than those who did not complete high school. Respondents with (grand)parents who were not born in Belgium are more likely to be ambitious on the national and European level (but not the local level) than those whose parents are born in Belgium. Finally, those who are living at home with their parents or married are less likely to have ambition on the European level than those who are single or living with friends.

Multivariate Attitudinal Analyses

Table 3 introduces the analyses including political characteristics. These analyses investigate the extent to which the gender gaps in political ambition still hold once we control for various political characteristics.

Table 3 Results Attitudinal Linear Regression Analyses of Political Ambition on Local, National and European Level

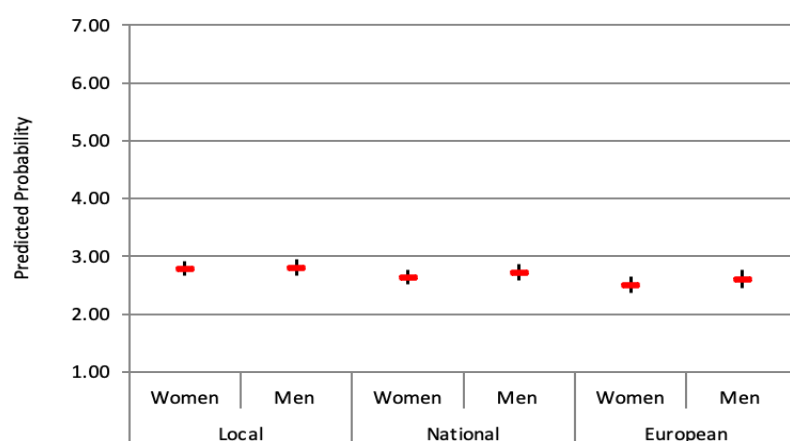
	Local		National		European	
	B	Std. Err.	B	Std. Err.	B	Std. Err.
Woman	-.01	.10	-.08	.10	-.10	.11
Education (<i>ref.</i> : Lower than high school)						
High school	.11	.16	-.18	.15	-.35 *	.18
Higher level of education	.07	.17	.32	.15	-.37 *	.19
Employment status (<i>ref.</i> : not employed)						
Student	-.34	.20	-.32	.20	-.33	.22
Employed	-.25	.17	.25	.16	-.36	.19
Age	.02	.01	.01	.01	.02	.01
Family situation (<i>ref.</i> : single or living with friends)						
Living with parents	.14	.14	-.00	.13	-.36 *	.15
Married	-.05	.14	-.11	.14	-.36 *	.16
Children	.02	.15	.15	.14	-.10	.16
Non-Belgian (Grand)Parents	-.01	.10	.17	.10	.41 ***	.11
Party member	.14	.24	.70 **	.23	-.09	.26
Political socialisation	.07	.05	.07	.05	.11 *	.05
Convince others	.24 ***	.05	.26 ***	.05	.21 ***	.05
Political interest	.12 ***	.02	.09 ***	.02	.05	.02
Capacity	.45 ***	.05	.51 ***	.05	.55 ***	.05
Constant	-.27	.44	.26	.43	.35	.49
R Square	.34		.38		.30	

Source: 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey; Notes: *** p <.001 ** p <.01 *p<.05 (two-tailed).

As Table 3 indicates, the gender effect is no longer significant for any of the three levels. The gender differences in political ambition on the three levels of policy making can thus be explained by the political characteristics that were added in the model. In particular convincing others of one’s own opinion and the self-assessment of one’s own capacity matter. They both have a positive and significant impact on political ambition on all levels of policy making. Being politically interested is positively associated with political ambition on the local and national level, and being a party member increases the likelihood of being politically ambitious on the national level. Having frequent political discussions during teenage years at home slightly increases ambition on the European level. Adding these attitudinal variables to the models strongly increases the portion of the variance explained, hereby confirming that these attitudes matter significantly for political ambition. They do so for all three levels of policy-making.

Figure 2 presents the predicted probabilities for women and men based on the attitudinal models. They clearly show how women and men have virtually the same level of political ambition on the local, national and European level once political characteristics are taken into account. Average scores (on a scale from 1-7) are 2.80 for both women and men on the local level, 2.64 for women and 2.73 for men on the national level, and 2.51 for women and 2.61 for men on the European level.

Figure 2 Predicted Probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for Political Ambition According to Gender (Based on Attitudinal Model)



Given the strong impact of enjoying to convince others, evaluations of one’s own political capacity, and political interest on the gender differences in political ambition, as well as the gender differences in these attitudes (see Table A), we also empirically explored whether these attitudes have a similar effect on political ambition among women and men. We found little significant gender interactions, suggesting that the attitudes impact political ambition in a similar way among women and men. We

did, however, find a significant ($p < .05$) effect for the interaction between gender and convincing others for ambition on the local level, and a marginally significant effect ($p < .10$) for the same interaction for ambition on the national level. The analyses are presented in Table C in the appendix. The predicted probabilities are presented in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

Figure 3 Predicted Probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for Political Ambition on the Local Level According to Gender and Convincing Others

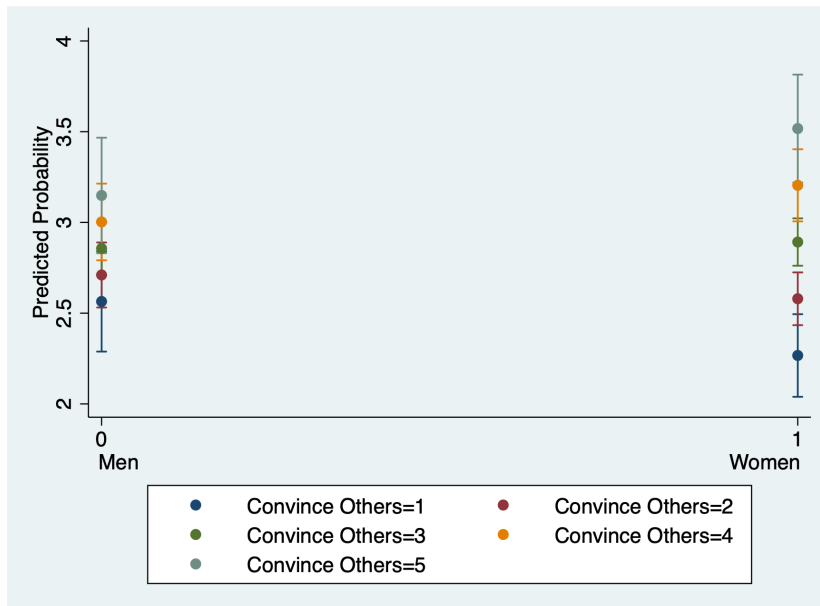
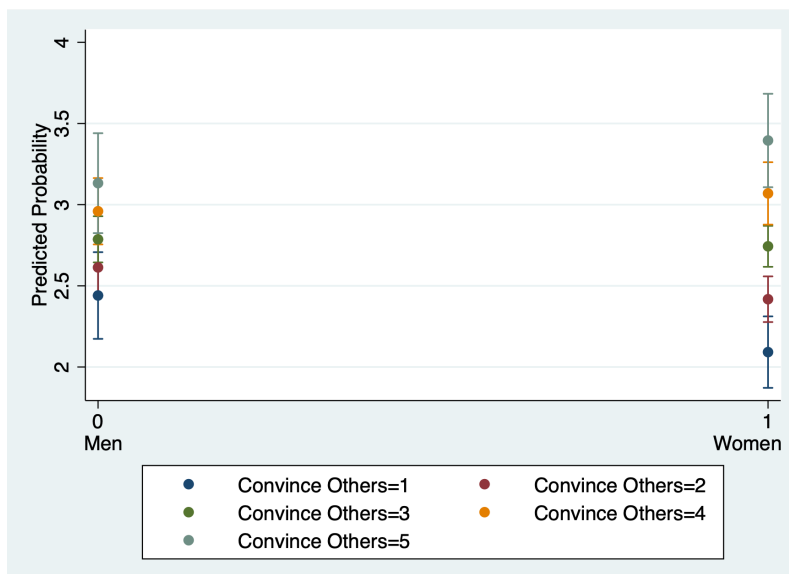


Figure 4 Predicted Probabilities (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for Political Ambition on the National Level According to Gender and Convincing Others



The figures illustrate how enjoying convincing others positively affects political ambition among both women and men. In both cases (thus for both ambition on the local and national level), the effect is, however, stronger for women compared with men. Thus while women are on average less likely to enjoy convincing others, enjoying convincing others matters more for their levels of political ambition on the local and national level than it does for men.

5. Conclusion

Women are found to consistently report lower levels of nascent political ambition than men. Yet, the interpretation given to “political” in previous research is often limited to national and/or partisan politics. To get a broader and more detailed understanding of the gender gap in political ambition, this study investigates whether gender differences in ambition occur to the same extent across local, national and European levels of policy making. Relying on theoretical accounts from previous research stating that (1) the substantive issues dealt with at the local level are more appealing to women than men, (2) less resources are needed to campaign at the local level and women tend to count on a less straightforward access to these financial resources, and (3) taking up a mandate at the local level is less risky and women tend to be more risk avoidant, we expected in this study to find a smaller gender gap in political ambition at the local level compared with the national and European level.

Using data from an original survey conducted among a representative sample of Flemish citizens aged between 18 and 35, a number of important findings emerge. First, our results highlight that gender gaps occur for all levels of policy making – but cease to be significant once controlling for attitudinal characteristics. Attitudes, and in particular the evaluation of one’s own capacity and the extent to which people enjoy convincing others, have a crucial impact on the gender gap for all levels of policy making. Second, our results reveal some support for the three presented arguments suggesting that the gender gap is smallest for ambition on the local level (differences in substantive issues, in needed resources to campaign and in risks). The difference in the size of the gender gap is, however, small. We should thus rather speak about subtle differences in levels of political ambition, in favour of the local arena for women politicians-to-be.

Our results have a number of implications. First, although the gender gap in political ambition is smaller at the local level and the local political level is often presented as being most apt to experiment with new forms of democratic organisation and democratic renewal (Caluwaerts, Reuchamps, & Brans, 2013), it is interesting to observe that the representation of women in local electoral politics lags behind the regional and federal level in Flanders/Belgium. Local party chairs themselves also indicate to face several problems related to the recruitment of women candidates (Devroe et al., 2020). As supply and demand dynamics are in many ways interconnected (Josefsson, 2020; Piscopo &

Kenny, 2020), it is thus important to gain more insight into the role played by (local) parties, which continue to be the most important gatekeepers, both formally and informally (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015). Candidate selection procedures potentially also shape and 'gender' the meaning of political ambition (Josefsson, 2020), hindering the development of women's nascent political ambition, and ultimately also women's access to political power. Second, as attitudes, such as the evaluation of one's own capacity and the extent to which people enjoy convincing others, are found to have a crucial impact on the gender gap in political ambition, it is of paramount importance for women to develop more confidence in their political competences and abilities. A large number of studies have shown that gender differences in such attitudinal variables are large and stable (Dassonneville & McAllister, 2018). We, therefore, argue that political parties can again play an important role in this regard, for example by providing sufficient support or additional training opportunities.

Taken together, we can conclude that a focus on levels of political ambition at different policy levels is worth pursuing in future research on gender and political ambition. A logical next step for future research would, however, be to take a cross-national perspective and delve into how cultural and institutional factors influence the gender gap in political ambition at different levels of policy making, and how this interplays with (f)actors at the demand-side.

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Appendix

Table A Means and Percentages, and Standard Deviations (SD) for All Independent Variables

	Range	Women		Men		Sign. Test ^a
		Mean/ Percent	SD	Mean/ Percent	SD	
Education (<i>ref.</i> : Lower than high school)						
High school	0/1	46.0%		47.9%		
Higher level of education	0/1	42.8%		40.2%		
Employment status (<i>ref.</i> : not employed)						
Student	0/1	32.9%		31.4%		
Employed	0/1	55.3%		61.2%		
Age	18-35	25.59	5.08	25.35	5.27	
Family situation (<i>ref.</i> : single or living with friends)						
Living with parents	0/1	42.0%		44.2%		
Married or living together	0/1	36.5%		28.6%		
Children	0/1	24.7%		17.3%		*
Non-Belgian	0/1	34.4%		33.7%		
(Grand)Parents						
Party member	0/1	2.7%		6.2%		*
Political Socialization	1-5	2.45	1.12	2.45	1.06	
Convince others	1-5	2.62	1.17	2.86	1.18	**
Political interest	0-10	4.24	2.74	5.03	2.78	**
Capacity	1-5	2.46	1.13	3.03	1.23	***

Source: 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey

^a Significance tests conducted through Binary Logistic and Linear regressions.

*** p <.001 ** p <.01 *p<.05 (two-tailed).

Table B T-Tests Political Ambition on Different Levels of Policy Making

	Women	Men
Local - National	.001 ***	.473
Local - European	.000 ***	.058
National - European	.006 **	.080

Source: 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Table C Results linear Regression Analyses including Interaction between Gender and Convincing Others for Political Ambition on Local and National Level

	Local		National	
	B	Std. Err.	B	Std. Err.
Woman	-.46	.25	-.50 *	.24
Education (<i>ref.</i> : Lower than high school)				
High school	.13	.16	-.17	.15
Higher level of education	.10	.17	-.29	.16
Employment status (<i>ref.</i> : not employed)				
Student	-.34	.20	-.32	.20
Employed	-.24	.17	-.24	.16
Age	.02	.01	.01	.01
Family situation (<i>ref.</i> : single or living with friends)				
Living with parents	.13	.14	-.01	.13
Married	-.04	.14	-.11	.14
Children	.01	.15	.14	.14
Non-Belgian (Grand)Parents	-.02	.10	.17	.10
Party member	.12	.24	.68 **	.23
Political socialisation	.07	.05	.07	.05
Convince others	.15 *	.07	.17 *	.06
Political interest	.12 ***	.02	.09 ***	.02
Capacity	.45 ***	.05	.52 ***	.05
Woman x convince others	.17 *	.08	.15 *	.08
Constant	-.34	.46	.48	.44
R Square	.34		.38	

Source: 2022 Flemish Political Ambition Survey

Notes: *** p <.001 ** p <.01 *p<.05 (two-tailed).