

## Career Plans and Career Politicians: Gender, Work-Life Balance, and Political Ambition

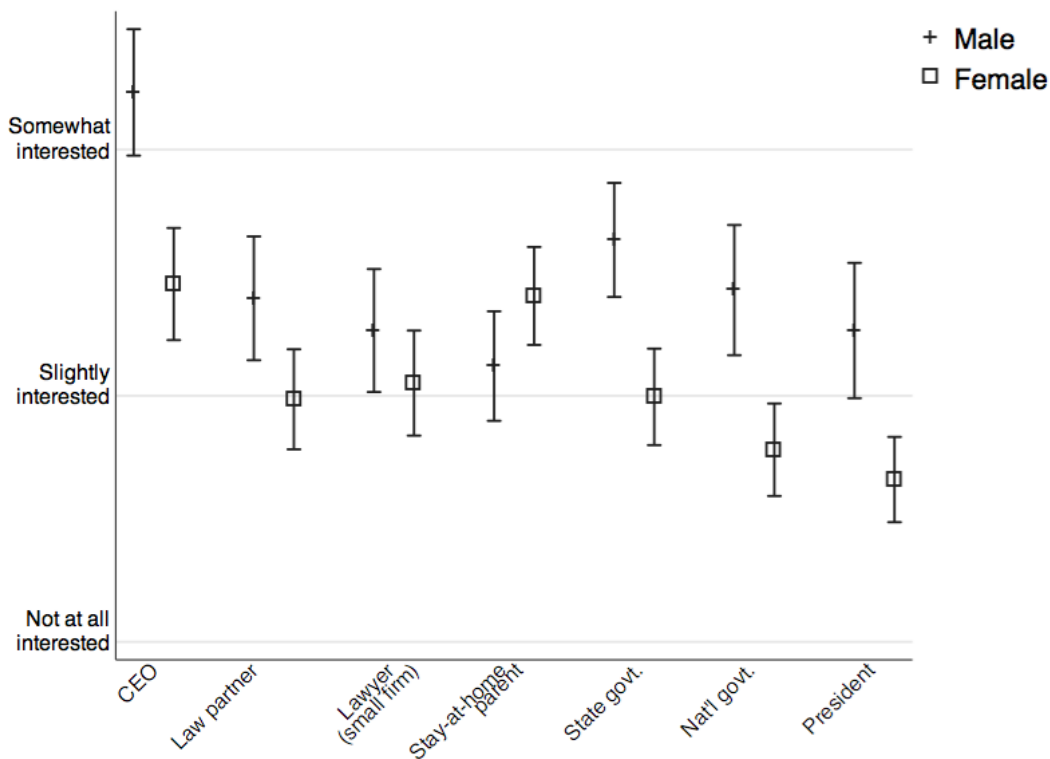
Academic work on the underrepresentation of women in electoral politics often treats the decision to run for office as independent of other career choices. As is the case in other fields, however, many women may eschew careers in electoral politics out of a desire to maintain work-life balance. Because women continue to do a majority of child care and housework, they tend to avoid careers that lack flexibility, including those that have long hours, penalize workers for taking time off to care for children, and require a great deal of travel. Political careers are inflexible in all of these ways.

To understand how work-life balance challenges affect the initial decision to run for office, I surveyed a nationally representative sample of undergraduates, along with a sample of Yale undergraduates, and examined their desire to run for elected office as an option among a variety of careers and life choices. I asked students about their career interests, work-life balance expectations, and interest in political careers. I analyzed how these interests and expectations interact. I study students because they still have a degree of choice about their future that people further into their careers lack. This allows me to study gender differences in career choices before they are constrained by later life experiences.

I find that young men and women continue to make different career decisions, maintain different life plans, and harbor different expectations about balancing work and family. Female students express less interest in inflexible careers, including those in politics, and students who are more concerned with issues of family and workplace flexibility are less interested in running for political office. This suggests that fewer women than men may run for office because, from an early age, women perceive that caring for a family will constrain their career options.

In addition, I surveyed and interviewed a sample of Alaska state legislators about a child-care center in Juneau, Alaska, which sets aside spaces for the children of state legislators. I find a consensus among Alaska state legislators and staffers that the child-care center aids recruitment of parents with young children, especially women, to run for political office.

This research suggests that unless men and women begin distributing housework and child care more equally, the job of a politician changes fundamentally, or states contemplate policies designed to ameliorate work-life struggles, we can expect the gender imbalance in government to remain. Policies aimed at increasing equality in the home, and/or decreasing the child care burden, such as paid maternity and paternity leave and subsidized child care, would likely encourage women and other underrepresented groups to run for office in greater numbers.



### Career Interest.

*Note:* Plots mean student interest in each career by respondent gender along with 95% confidence intervals. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest in each of the following careers: CEO, partner at a large law firm, lawyer at a small law firm, stay-at-home parent, representative in state or local political office (e.g., city council or the state legislature), representative in national political office (U.S. Congress or Senate), and President of the United States. Answers were on a 5-point scale consisting of “Not at all interested,” “Slightly interested,” “Somewhat interested,” “Very interested,” and “Extremely interested.”