




LETTER

# Does the Presence or Absence of Elections Remove Gender Differences in Ambition for Public Service?

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## Abstract

Perhaps because scholars of political ambition have focused almost entirely on electoral ambition, the presence of elections has been thought to play a major role in shaping who expresses interest in public service. In this article, we examine whether the presence or absence of elections changes women's political ambition. Using surveys of law students, federal bureaucrats, and the general public, we find the relationship between gender and ambition for elected office is similar to the relationship between gender and ambition for bureaucratic and judicial service. We show that, although women are deterred from public service by the elections that act as gateways to those opportunities, the effects of elections on gendered political ambition duplicate the effects of other components of public service. Rather than unique, elections are duplicative in their effects, reinforcing the relationship between gender and ambition rather than fundamentally changing who expresses ambition for public service.

**Keywords:** Gender and Political Ambition; Electoral vs. Non-Electoral Ambition; Public Service Careers

Women are underrepresented at all levels of government (Center for American Women and Politics 2023), which affects representation (Gerrity et al. 2007), the behaviour of public officials (Dodson 2006), and citizens' responses to government (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Stauffer 2021). While other barriers for women to be elected office exist (for example, voter biases [Karpowitz et al. 2024] and elite support [Barber, Butler, and Preece 2016]), one key barrier to representational equality is gender differences in ambition (Fox and Lawless 2014; Fulton et al. 2006; Preece 2016).

Recent studies have highlighted elections as reducing ambition among women (for example, Kanthak and Woon 2015; Koltveit 2022; Preece and Stoddard 2015), suggesting the gender distribution of office seekers might be fundamentally different without elections. However, studies asserting elections' critical role in shaping ambition do not distinguish whether elections change or merely reinforce gender differences in ambition.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there are reasons to doubt elections

<sup>1</sup>We are not arguing elections have no effect on ambition (see Kanthak and Woon 2015, Preece and Stoddard 2015). Instead, we argue removing elections would not change who runs because elections' deterrent effect for women duplicates the effects of other components of public service. Kanthak and Woon (2015, p. 610) explicitly recognize this possibility, stating 'we claim only that election aversion is a distinct contributing factor [detering women from office-seeking], not that it is unique'. They do not, however, test this possibility.

are unique in deterring women. Women are underrepresented in non-elected political positions such as the bureaucracy (Bishu and Headley 2020) and the judiciary (American Bar Association 2023).<sup>2</sup> Yet, with few exceptions, scholarship on gendered ambition has focused on candidate emergence and ambition for *elected* office (for example, Crowder-Meyer 2020; Fox and Lawless 2005), largely ignoring ambition for other forms of public service (see Ammassari et al. [2022], Badas and Stauffer [2023], Bauer and Darkwah [2019], and Koltveit [2022] for exceptions).

In this work, we test whether the presence or absence of elections changes women's ambition for public service by examining the relationship between gender and interest in high-profile elected and non-elected positions in government. Using samples of federal employees, law students, and the general public, we find gender differences in ambition for elected office are similar to those for influential unelected offices.

However, because these positions in public service vary beyond merely the presence or absence of elections, we also separate public service into its various components and examine whether gender predicts aversion to the electoral process and other aspects of public service. We find gender has a similar relationship with the (un)attractiveness of elections as it does with the (un)attractiveness of other components of public service. Consistent with work on gendered political socialization (Bos et al. 2022; Fox and Lawless 2014, Preece 2016), our work indicates women are deterred by multiple components of public service. Rather than unique, elections are duplicative in dissuading women from public service.

### Political Ambition and Electoral Politics

Even if elections deter women from running, adding or removing elections may have no effect on who is interested in public service because those deterred by electoral procedures might also be deterred by other components of public service. Yet previous work does not provide a definitive answer. The two previous attempts to answer this question, of which we are aware, examine gender differences in ambition for elected and appointed positions among young party activists in Norway (Koltveit 2022) and in Australia, Italy, and Spain (Ammassari et al. 2022). Yet, because the appointed positions studied (party workers or advisors) are lower profile and operate behind the scenes, differences in ambition could be the result of elections or position salience. Indeed, Koltveit (2022) finds significant negative effects of gender on ambition for the most salient appointed position (state secretary) while finding no gender effects for less salient appointed positions (advisors and hired party staff). Moreover, there are gender gaps in ambition for clerkships (unelected positions) within the US court system (Badas and Stauffer 2023).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, previous work has not examined whether aspects deterring women from elected office might also discourage non-elected public service. From a young age, women are socialized to see political leadership positions as a 'man's world' (Bos et al. 2022). Generally, agentic values of being 'competitive' or 'outgoing' (generally viewed as more masculine traits) are more congruent with the ethos of politics (Conroy and Green 2020). In this vein, women generally are disinclined towards public speaking (De Paola et al. 2021) and less inclined towards leadership roles (Alan et al. 2020; Ertac and Gurdal 2012), which are key components of public service.

<sup>2</sup>Women are also underrepresented among congressional staff (Ritchie and You 2021) and in campaigns (Chewning et al. 2024; Enos and Hersh 2015). This work, however, focuses on institutional barriers or gatekeepers rather than on gender differences in ambition.

<sup>3</sup>Bauer and Darkwah (2019) interview Ghanaian women to suggest electoral politics deters women. However, many deterrents are not unique to electoral processes.

## Ambition for Public Service

To examine the effects of the presence or absence of elections, we rely on a general population sample and two samples of political elites.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we use two different methodological approaches. In the first approach, we examine ambition by gender for elected and unelected positions with similar leadership responsibilities and of similar public salience. In the second approach, we break public service into its various components to examine whether respondents have the same affinity or averseness towards both the electoral and the non-electoral components of public service. Below we first detail the different samples before analyzing the results from the two different approaches.

### Sample #1: Law Students

The first sample is a survey of students enrolled at eight different law schools.<sup>5</sup> Links to the survey were distributed to students by administrators and faculty at each school, along with brief explanations. We intentionally identified a diverse set of public and private law schools and focused on law schools where we had personal connections to current students, former students, faculty, or administrators to increase the likelihood of being able to distribute the survey.

The sample of law students was recruited during the spring of 2022. While not representative of all law students, the law schools include both public and private law schools and are diverse in their ideological leanings and reputational rankings.<sup>6</sup> Though we do not know the total number of students invited to participate, we received 522 responses overall.<sup>7</sup>

We survey law school students for two important reasons. First, law students are individuals for whom public service is realistically feasible as a law degree opens opportunities in the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and, potentially, elected office. Second, their training exposes them to the demands of these various positions.

### Sample #2: Federal Bureaucrats

The second sample is of federal government employees. Like law students, bureaucrats are aware of the demands of public service. In particular, these individuals have extensive knowledge about bureaucratic public service, arguably the type of public service in our analysis least familiar to most people. We also use this sample because it is an elite sample with a wider age range as young adults exhibit particularly high levels of political ambition. Government employees also have the education and income to make public service a plausible endeavour (Fox and Lawless 2005).

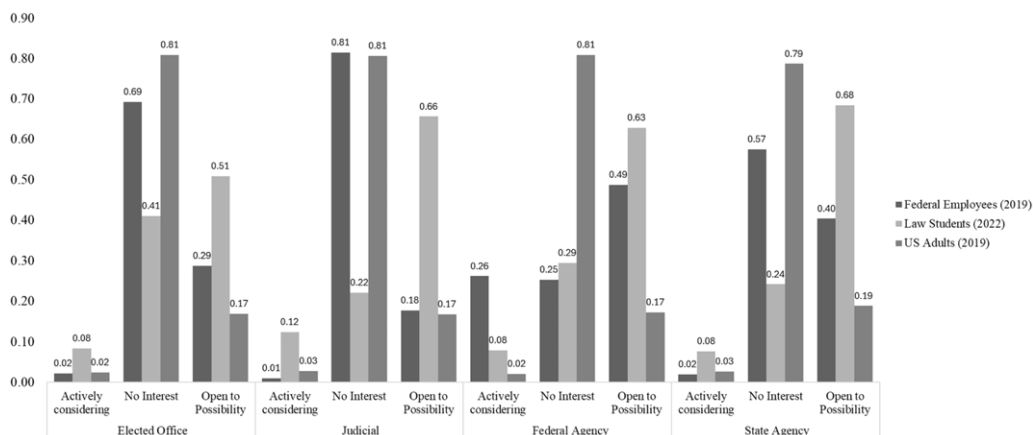
The sample of bureaucrats comes from the second wave of the American Government Employee Survey (AGES), fielded in January/February of 2019. The primary purpose of the survey was to gauge the effect of the government shutdown on federal employees participating in a prior

<sup>4</sup>All research involving human subjects was approved by the authors' IRB ([IRB Information Redacted]). All respondents voluntarily gave their informed consent to participate. Further information on compliance with ethical practices concerning human participants is in the online [appendix](#).

<sup>5</sup>The law students in our sample attended Brigham Young University J. Reuben Clark Law School, Capital University Law School, Florida State University Law School, Regent University School of Law, University of Maine School of Law, University of Oregon School of Law, University of Pittsburgh School of Law, and Washburn University School of Law.

<sup>6</sup>While our sample of law students is diverse, because two of these schools are religious-based institutions (Brigham Young University and Regents University), we might be concerned that students at these schools might adopt more traditional gender roles which might influence the results. To address these concerns, we reran the models iteratively removing one school from the analysis. We also reran models excluding Brigham Young University and Regent University students. None of these results differ substantially from what we present here.

<sup>7</sup>The total enrolment of the law schools is around 2,600 students suggesting a response rate of *at least* 20%. Of the 522 respondents, 75.1% completed the entire survey. The sample is diverse on party identification (39.3% Democrat, 35.7% Republican, and 25.0% Independent), ideology (48.0% liberal and 32.4% conservative), and gender (42.2% female). More information is available in the [appendix](#).



**Figure 1.** Proportion Expressing Electoral Ambition by Sample.

**Note:** Bars are the proportion of respondents in each survey who indicated ambition.

Sources: Law Student Survey 2022. American Government Employees Survey (2019). SSI 2019 National Survey.

survey wave ( $n = 3,053$  in the initial wave). Recontacting original participants and inviting them to answer additional questions related to the federal shutdown resulted in 2,084 responses.<sup>8</sup>

### Sample #3: Nationally Representative Sample

Lastly, we also use a general population sample. Because law students and bureaucrats likely understand better the responsibilities of public service in non-elected positions, electoral components might be less influential in their considerations of public service. For this reason, we also use a nationally representative sample of US adults.

Survey Sampling International (SSI) recruited 1,777 subjects to participate in an online study in September 2019. The sample is comparable to other nationally representative samples and estimates from the American Community Survey (see the [appendix](#) for more information).

### Measures

In all samples, the ambition instrument was the same with the exception of the question about ambition in the federal bureaucracy for the bureaucratic sample. We asked respondents, ‘How would you characterize your interest in \_\_\_\_\_ in the future?’ Respondents indicated their interest in serving in elected office, the judiciary, and the state and federal bureaucracy. Our judicial ambition measure used the words ‘becoming a judge or a justice’ in the blank, the measure of federal (state) bureaucracy ambition used the phrase ‘running or overseeing federal (state or local) agencies’, and the measure of electoral ambition used ‘holding elected office’. For each question, respondents could indicate they (1) had ‘absolutely no interest’; (2) were ‘open to the possibility’; or (3) were ‘actively working toward’.

Because bureaucrats were already serving in the federal bureaucracy, we asked about progressive ambition – as opposed to nascent ambition – within federal agencies specifically asking their interest ‘in moving up the ranks in federal agencies’.

Figure 1 shows overall levels of ambition for each sample and area of public service. In line with previous surveys of the general public, nascent ambition for elected office among the public is low. We also find low levels of nascent ambition for other leadership positions in public service in the

<sup>8</sup>The overall response rate was 68%. Of the 2,084 respondents, 88.4% completed the entire survey. More information is available in the [appendix](#).

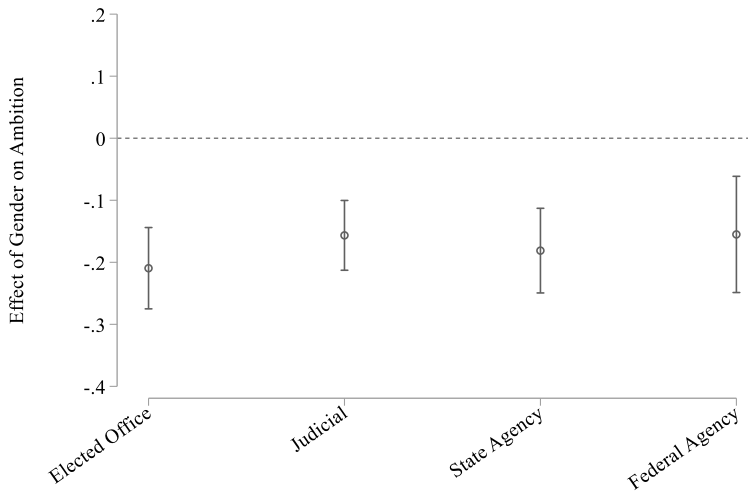


Figure 2. Effects of Gender on Ambition Among Bureaucratic Sample.

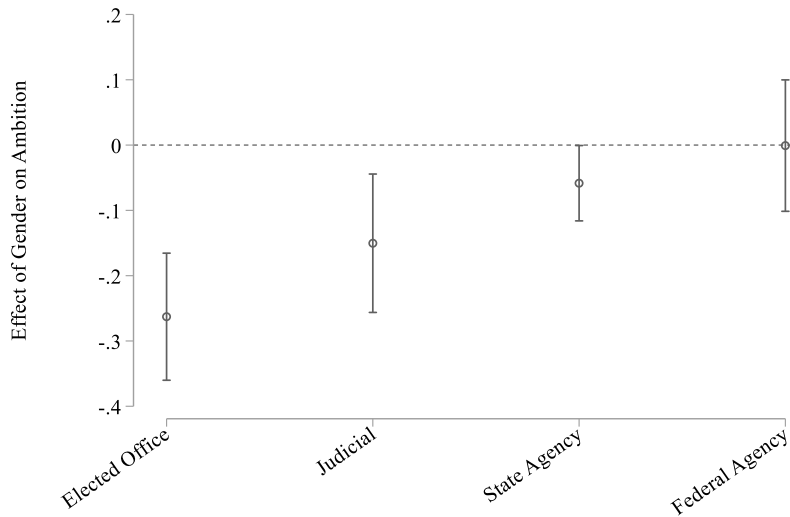
judiciary and the bureaucracy. Law students and federal bureaucrats, who have put themselves in positions where public service is possible, harbour greater ambitions for public service. Further discussion of these differences is available in the online [appendix](#).

### Elections and the Types of Individuals Who Express Ambition for Public Service

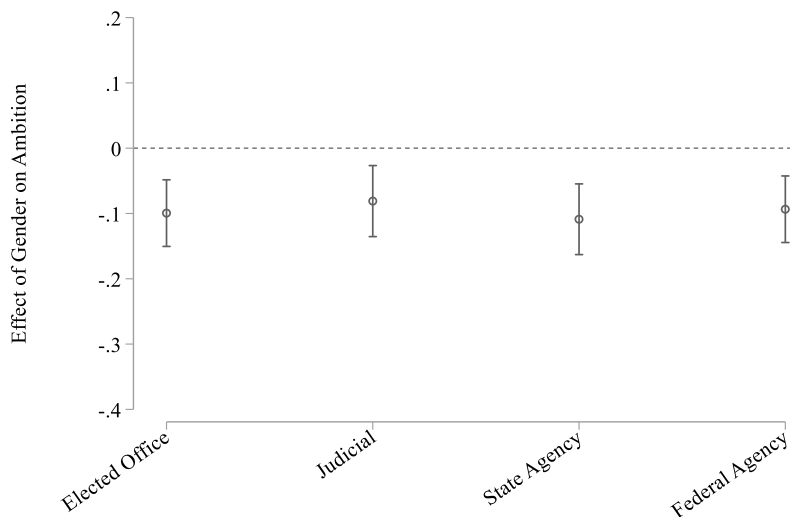
While there is some variation across samples in the extent to which gender correlates with ambition (as might be expected given self-selection into becoming law students or federal bureaucrats), we are interested in whether there are gender differences in ambition across different areas of public service *within* samples. Figure 2 shows the effects of gender on political ambition for different types of public service for federal bureaucrats; Figure 3 shows analogous effects for law students; and Figure 4 shows effects for the general population. For ease of interpretation, we present results from Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models with the dependent variable coded 1–3, but results are nearly identical when we use ordered logistic regression models. All models include controls for age, race, education, political ideology, party identification, political knowledge, and political interest, and, in models using the sample of law students, whether the law school was public or private.<sup>9</sup> Full results and alternative ordered logistic model results are in the [appendix](#).

The results from all three samples suggest elections *do not* fundamentally change the negative relationship between gender and public service ambition. In the bureaucratic sample (Figure 2), women are less likely to express ambition for elected office. They are also less likely to express ambition for judicial service or for the bureaucracy. For law students (Figure 3) women are less likely to express ambition for all types of public service as the coefficient on gender is consistently negative, although the effects for federal bureaucratic leadership are not significant. Although gender effects on ambition for state and federal agencies are smaller, the effect of gender on ambition for judicial office is not significantly different than that for elected office. For the general population (Figure 4) we find consistently sized gender gaps in ambition for all forms of public service. Because some states have judicial elections, we also reran models using the general population sample excluding individuals living in states where there are judicial elections, which

<sup>9</sup>Age and education are not included as controls in the law student sample because they were not asked. Political knowledge questions were not asked in the AGES survey. Political interest is only available in the general population survey.



**Figure 3.** Effects of Gender on Ambition Among Law Student Sample.



**Figure 4.** Effects of Gender on Ambition Among General Population Sample.

are very similar to what we present in Figure 2. In short, across all three samples, women are consistently less likely to express ambition for all types of public service regardless of whether the means to entry includes elections.

### Gender and Different Components of Public Service

While our previous analysis indicates gender does not differentially affect ambition for different positions in public service (both those with and without elections), there are other differences in these positions beyond the electoral components that could confound our analysis, potentially mitigating the effect of eliminating the electoral component. As such, we break public service into various components to examine whether electoral components of public service generate similar

**Table 1.** Attractiveness of Public Office Loadings

	Personal Life Components	Electoral Components	Job Responsibility Components
Lack of privacy	0.81	0.10	0.15
Public scrutiny	0.77	0.01	0.10
The conflict	0.77	0.07	0.03
Difficult on family/friends	0.75	0.11	0.13
The schedule/travelling	0.61	0.03	0.22
The publicity	0.12	0.81	0.11
Fundraising	0.06	0.80	0.09
Trying to persuade people to vote for you	0.05	0.71	0.16
The competition	0.05	0.60	0.27
Talking about solutions	0.19	0.06	0.86
Having to make important decisions	0.38	0.24	0.76
Meeting new people	0.12	0.35	0.63

responses from women as other aspects of public service. This allows us to check whether the effects of elections duplicate the effects of other aspects of public service.

The logical yet untested explanation for the similarity in gender effects on ambition for elected and unelected positions is that women perceive the desirability of various elements of public service similarly.<sup>10</sup> For example, individuals who are willing to engage in the glad-handing essential to political campaigns might also be more attracted to legislative and policy negotiations. Thus, individuals attracted (averse) to electoral components of public service might also be attracted (averse) to other aspects of public service.

To examine this possibility, we separate public service into various components and examine how gender affects the attractiveness of those various components. Utilizing data from 211 interviews about what aspects of public service are attractive or unappealing derived from a snowball sample of the personal contacts of undergraduate students at a Western US university, we generated a list of twelve items considered appealing or unappealing about public service.<sup>11</sup>

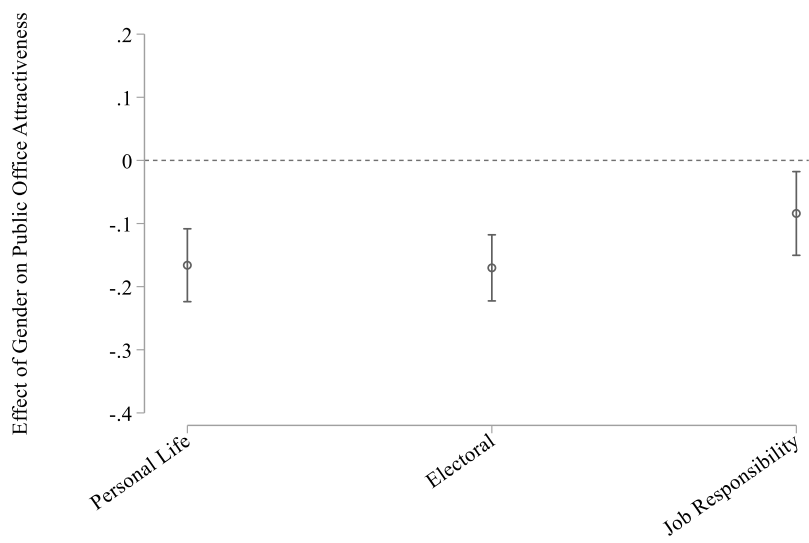
We included these twelve items in the 2019 SSI survey and asked respondents to identify whether each aspect of public service would make them less likely, neither/neutral, or more likely to run for office. To group these items into larger components of public service, we conducted exploratory factor analysis with Promax rotation. Table 1 shows the items with their loadings.

The results suggest interest in public office lines up along three dimensions. The first of those components relates to aspects of personal life and includes the lack of privacy, public scrutiny, difficulty on family/friends, and schedule/travelling. The second is directly related to electoral concerns and includes competition, fundraising, and voter persuasion. The third component relates to the job responsibilities of public service such as talking about solutions and decision making. These constructs are also internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 for the personal life components, 0.81 for the electoral components, and 0.70 for the job responsibility components).

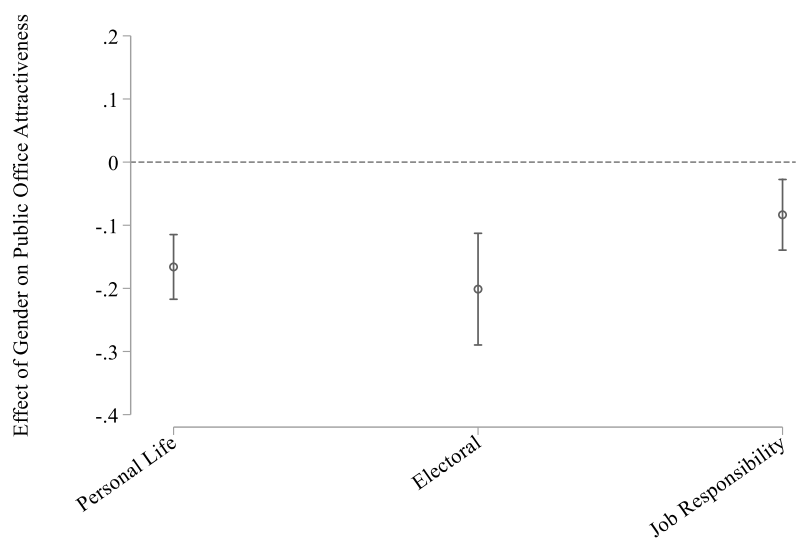
In the surveys of both the general population and of law students, respondents indicated whether each item would (1) make them less likely to run, (2) neither/neutral, or (3) more likely to run (3). Using these responses, we create an additive index consisting of items for each component. We added the rating of each of the items for each factor and divided it by the number of items. Each of these variables is scaled 1–3, with higher scores indicating a higher likelihood of seeking public office.

<sup>10</sup>An alternative is that elections do not affect gender differences in ambition, which is unlikely given previous work (Kanthak and Woon 2015, Preece and Stoddard 2015).

<sup>11</sup>Most respondents (~90%) were from Oregon, Washington, Utah, Idaho, and Nevada; and close to 50% were female. These interviews also included questions about how elected officials ought to behave and their interest in public service.



**Figure 5.** Gender’s Effect on the Attractiveness of Aspects of Public Office (General Population Sample).



**Figure 6.** Gender’s Effect on the Attractiveness of Aspects of Public Office (General Population Sample) (Law Student Sample).

Figures 5 and 6 show the effect of gender on the attractiveness of the components of public service for the general population and the law student population, respectively.<sup>12</sup> As before, full models are available in the online [appendix](#).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Unfortunately, the conceptualization of this component of the project occurred after the survey of bureaucrats was already in the field, and these questions were not asked of bureaucrats.

<sup>13</sup>To make sure the results were not driven by a single item, we also reran models iteratively removing a single item from the indices. Those results are the same and gender consistently has a negative effect for all three factors regardless of inclusion or exclusion of any particular item.

The results in Figures 5 and 6 show the negative relationship between gender and the electoral components of public service is not unique. For both samples, gender is negatively correlated with the attractiveness of each component of public service. Women's aversion to elections duplicates aversion to the personal life and job responsibility aspects of public service.

## Conclusion

Although elections may seem like a prominent component that by themselves, if eliminated, might increase women's ambition for public office, our results suggest this is not the case. Removing elections as a method for selecting public servants does not appear to fundamentally change women's ambition for public service because elections appear to duplicate the negative effects of other aspects of public service on ambition for public service among women.

Our findings instead are consistent with existing research on gendered socialization into political leadership positions (Bos et al. 2022; Fox and Lawless 2014, Preece 2016). Although women may be averse to competition, the same experiences and socialization that leads them to avoid competition also affect how they perceive themselves as fitting into the political realm and their comfort in engaging in the various responsibilities of public service. While elections are a deterrent to women's political ambitions, so too are other components of public service in the public sphere. Rather than unique in their influence on ambition across genders, elections reinforce the attractiveness, or the lack thereof, of other components of public service to women. Increasing ambition for public service among women thus requires larger changes and cannot be achieved by merely eliminating elections as pathways to public service.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000449>.

**Data availability statement.** Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3BXMOM>.

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