

Are There Social Class Gaps in Nascent Political Ambition? Survey Evidence from the Americas*

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Abstract: Why do so few working-class citizens go on to hold elected office in democracies? This paper tests an explanation motivated by the larger literature on descriptive representation, namely, differences in *nascent ambition*. Are workers less likely to be personally inclined to run? In this study, we use new data from 10 surveys administered to 13,535 respondents in the Americas to conduct the first cross-national analysis of social class gaps in nascent ambition (and one of the largest studies of nascent ambition to date). We find little evidence of social class differences in standard measures of nascent ambition, although we find substantial gender gaps, consistent with much past research.

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Scholars of comparative politics have recently taken a renewed interest in the question of why so few less-affluent or working-class citizens—people employed in manual labor, service industry, clerical, informal sector, and labor union jobs—go on to hold elected office in the world’s democracies (see Carnes and Lupu Forthcoming). In Latin America, workers make up between 60 and 90 percent of the economy, but politicians who last worked in those occupations make up just 5 to 25 percent of national legislatures (Carnes and Lupu 2015). In Europe, blue-collar workers made up around half of electorates at the end of the twentieth century but rarely more than 10 percent of national legislatures (Best and Cotta 2000). This sharp underrepresentation of politicians from working-class jobs in many countries—and the numerical or descriptive overrepresentation of politicians from more affluent classes—appears to tilt policy in favor of the preferences of the affluent on economic issues (Carnes and Lupu 2015; Hemingway 2022), social welfare policy (Han and Han 2020; O’Grady 2018), economic inequality (Alexiadou 2022), and even funding for cross-national defense organizations (Fuhrmann 2020).¹ It seems to matter that lower-income and working-class people so seldom go on to hold office in electoral democracies—and as such, scholars have begun to ask what keeps them out.

To date, research on the shortage of politicians from the working class has largely focused on the hypothesis that working-class citizens might be less qualified to hold office (e.g., Carnes 2018; Dal Bó et al. 2017) and the hypothesis that voters might prefer affluent candidates (e.g., Carnes 2018; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Griffin, Newman, and Buhr 2019; Wüest and

¹ It also seems to have broader consequences, including effects on the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions (Barnes and Saxton 2019).

Pontusson 2022). However, neither explanation has yet found much empirical support.

In this paper, we test another potential explanation, namely, that less-affluent citizens might have less nascent political ambition, that is, they might simply not have the personal “inclination to consider a candidacy” (Fox and Lawless 2005, 644). Nascent ambition is a prerequisite for officeholding in democracies; almost by definition, politicians are drawn from the pool of potential candidates with some desire to become politicians. If this desire is less common among working-class potential candidates, it would be an important part of the larger explanation for why democracies are so consistently governed by the privileged.

There are compelling reasons to think nascent ambition may be driving the underrepresentation of workers. Nascent ambition gaps have been studied extensively in research on the numerical or descriptive representation of social groups in elected office, most notably in research on the shortage of female politicians in the US, which finds that qualified women tend to exhibit less nascent ambition and that this gap helps explain the shortage of women in elected office (e.g., Fox and Lawless 2011; Lawless and Fox 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016; see also Fulton et al. 2006). In this paper, we ask whether there could be analogous social class gaps in nascent ambition that could help explain the shortage of working-class officeholders in the world’s democracies. Although gender and class are fundamentally different, there are a wide range of social forces that might lead qualified people who are less economically advantaged to be less interested in running for elected office.

Our analysis draws on new data from 10 surveys administered to 13,535 respondents in the Americas. These data are the first cross-national analysis of social class gaps in nascent ambition and perhaps the largest survey dataset on nascent ambition to date. Among respondents we can classify as potential candidates (those who have been previously encouraged to run for

office or who self-report more traits that promote candidacy), we do not find evidence of social class differences in standard measures of nascent ambition. That is, among people who seem qualified to run, many do not have a desire to run for office, but we do not find that qualified workers are *less likely* to have a desire to run. We do find substantial gender gaps, consistent with much past research. These findings suggest that nascent ambition may not help explain why so few working-class citizens go on to hold elected office in the world's democracies.

Nascent Ambition and Class

The study of nascent ambition is a relatively recent development in the literatures on candidate entry and representation. Research on the broader topic of political ambition dates back at least half a century (e.g., Schlesinger 1966), but for most of its history, it focused on how strategic considerations affect when and where ambitious people decide to run for office (Gulzar 2021), not the question of why some people want to hold office in the first place.

The modern study of nascent ambition originated in research on the underrepresentation of women in the United States. In 2005, Fox and Lawless published their foundational work on the topic, defining nascent ambition as the “embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest” (643). Whereas prior research on the shortage of women in office had focused on the incumbency advantage and the unequal makeup of the eligibility pool (e.g., Carroll and Jenkins 2005; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994), Lawless and Fox showed that even women in the “pipeline professions” that supply most politicians were less likely to want to be politicians and that this gap would continue to discourage women from holding office even as strategic opportunities for women to run expanded (e.g., Fox and Lawless 2014; Lawless and Fox 2005, 2010b).

Today, the concept of nascent ambition is a mainstay in research on descriptive representation and candidate selection (e.g., Peterson and Palmer 2022). Many studies of women's representation in the US have followed Lawless and Fox's lead, investigating the role of nascent ambition gaps in women's underrepresentation and exploring the factors that contribute to nascent ambition, most notably gendered early-life socialization experiences that discourage women from seeing themselves as candidates or seeing elected office as personally appealing (e.g., Gaddie 2004; Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016; Windett 2011). Comparative scholars have similarly asked whether gaps in nascent ambition among potential candidates help explain the shortage of female politicians in democracies around the world (on Brazil, see Wylie 2018; on Canada, see Pruyssers and Blais 2018; on Ghana, see Bauer and Darkwah 2020; on Japan, see Kage, Rosenbluth, and Tanaka 2019; on Pakistan, see Rincker, Aslam, and Isani 2017; on Uruguay, see Josefsson 2020; on Zambia, see Evans 2016).

Scholars have also begun to investigate whether nascent ambition gaps might help explain the underrepresentation of other social groups, often with an emphasis on the intersection with gender. Recent studies have investigated ambition gaps and the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups, religious minorities, and Millennials (e.g., Holman and Schneider 2018; Moore 2005; Shames 2017).

The basic argument underlying this growing literature is that candidate entry is a sort of winnowing process. Out of all citizens, only some are *potential candidates*, people who are eligible to run and who have the basic personal qualities necessary to do so. Of those potential candidates, only some develop nascent ambition, the desire to run, and of those only some actually put themselves forward as candidates, either within their party or in elections. Of course,

nascent ambition is itself the product of a wide range of forces. Fox and Lawless (2005) argue that a person's interest in running for office might be influenced by strategic considerations (beliefs about the likelihood of success), ideological motivations, minority status, political socialization early in life, and the life stage they are in. Other scholarship points to factors like women's aversion to conflict and power-related activities (Schneider et al. 2016). Comparative research also highlights the role that political parties play in fostering ambition by recruiting women (e.g., Hinojosa 2012; Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

Of course, not all social inequalities in political officeholding necessarily reflect differences in nascent ambition. The fact that a social group is underrepresented in public office cannot be taken as *de facto* evidence that that group exhibits less nascent ambition. The factors that influence nascent ambition may also vary over time and from place to place. For instance, comparative research has found that gender gaps in nascent ambition documented in the US may be smaller in other democracies (e.g., Rincker, Aslam, and Isani 2017). The importance of nascent ambition may also vary; in political contexts where party gatekeepers play more important roles in candidate selection, nascent ambition gaps may matter less (Piscopo 2019).

Even so, nascent ambition is a necessary condition for candidacy in all democracies. If nascent ambition is distributed unevenly across social classes—if working-class potential candidates tend to be less interested in political office—it would undoubtedly represent a significant obstacle to representation that could help explain the phenomenon of government by the privileged (and would raise further questions about what drives the link between class and nascent ambition). Even in contexts where parties play a critical role in selecting candidates, their slates of candidates may be skewed if potential candidates from one social class are less likely to express an interest to party leaders.

Many of the factors that have been hypothesized to influence nascent ambition could also differ across social classes in ways that would discourage working-class potential candidates from considering elected office. Perhaps the most prominent explanation in the literature centers on gendered patterns of socialization. Lawless and Fox (2014) find that gender gaps in nascent ambition are the result of socialization experiences early in life. Bos et al. (2022) likewise show that starting at a young age (and increasing over time), children perceive politics to be a “man’s world.” Schneider et al. (2016) find that women are less likely to want to run for office because political careers are viewed as serving power-related goals and not community-oriented goals, and because women are more conflict-averse. Preece and Stoddard (2016) similarly find experimental evidence that conflict aversion drives gender gaps in nascent ambition, and Kanthak and Woon (2015) show that women are specifically averse to elections, especially when they are perceived as costly or dishonest.

Although we must be cautious when importing theories from the study of gender to the study of class, what we know about social class differences in socialization could well lead to similar differences in an interest in running for elected office among otherwise equally qualified people from different social classes. Some seem analogous to the mechanisms documented in the literature on gender and nascent ambition. For instance, research on social class stratification has found that working-class people are less likely to have had early-life experiences like “being a leader in school organizations” (e.g., Paulsen 1991, 96) or experiences like talking about politics with parents and friends. These differences in early-life socialization might in turn make people more likely to see politics and political leadership generally as a “professional’s world.”

Working-class potential candidates might also exhibit conflict- or election-aversion. Some scholarship has found that “middle-class parents [are] more likely to place an emphasis on

their child's self-direction . . . while working-class parents [stress] their child's conformity to external authority" (Morgan, Alwin, and Griffin 1979, 157). If working-class people are socialized into more conformist attitudes that defer to authority, potential candidates from the working class may be less interested in the competitive and confrontational experience of running in elections.

Another form of socialization that might link class and nascent ambition is fear of failure. Research on stereotypes suggests that in certain contexts, lower-income and working-class people are seen as less capable (e.g., Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2019). To the extent that workers internalize such stereotypes, they might be less likely to believe they will be able to succeed in politics and therefore less interested in running for office.

Alternatively, working-class potential candidates might be more cynical about politics and therefore less likely to trust government or think that changing public policy is important. In places where working-class people do not hold office in large numbers (which is virtually every country in the Americas; e.g., Carnes and Lupu 2015), lower-income and working-class people might be less likely to "feel like the political system is . . . open to them" (Fox and Lawless 2005: 646) and therefore might be less interested in running for office.

Finally, in much of the Americas (where we conducted surveys), working-class people have experienced substantial political demobilization in recent decades. With the rise of global capital and market-oriented economic reforms, unions and leftwing parties across the region became less capable of mobilizing working-class supporters than they had been in the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Levitsky 2003; Murillo 2001). In the wake of these changes, working-class potential candidates may have lost interest or confidence in the political system. Labor unions have also played an important socializing role that fostered political engagement,

solidarism, and attitudes toward the role of government in many societies (e.g., Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Mosimann and Pontusson 2017). To the extent their influence has weakened in the contexts we study, we might expect nascent ambition among workers to have also declined.

In principle at least, it is quite possible that social class gaps in nascent ambition explain government by the privileged around the world. However, there are also reasons that we might not expect to observe such gaps.² Most importantly, the obstacles that give rise to gender gaps in nascent ambition are highly specific to gender. While it is possible that this theory might “travel,” it is crucial to remember that class is not gender (although women are well-represented among working-class citizens and politicians, including in the data we examine here). The process most often linked to gender gaps in nascent ambition—political socialization—is particularly specific to gender. Whereas entire political cultures might discourage women’s nascent ambition, in some countries social class divisions have been the chief organizing fault lines in political life. It is entirely possible that class-related differences in political socialization are simply not as pronounced or as harmful to working-class political ambitions as gender-based differences in socialization are to women.

This might be especially true in parts of the Americas. Some countries in the region have

² One possibility, for instance, is that economic characteristics like class are more transient, in that they can evolve over the life course and can change from generation to generation. Scholars have long debated whether people who experience economic mobility still retain characteristics of their prior social classes (e.g., Curtis 1960) or become acculturated into their destination class (e.g., Barber 1970). Still, it should be noted that intergenerational mobility is limited in the contexts we study (e.g., Ferreira et al. 2013).

long histories of working-class mobilization by parties with strong ties to organized labor (Collier 1999), even if many of these parties have weakened more recently (e.g., Lupu 2016; Roberts 2014). With some of them turning increasingly toward clientelism, local party brokers may now play a similar role of mobilizing working-class people (e.g., Zarazaga 2014). In fact, less-affluent Latin Americans are more likely to participate in elections and to contact government officials (Boulding and Holzner 2021), and new forms of organization have emerged following the decline of unions (Collier and Handlin 2009), suggesting that some working-class Latin Americans may still feel politically empowered.

Moreover, there are other possible explanations for why so few working-class citizens go on to become politicians that researchers have not yet explored. Perhaps the practical burdens associated with campaigning (e.g., taking time off work to participate in politics and run for office) are too much for working-class citizens in many countries to bear. Perhaps party leaders and other gatekeepers more often recruit, support, and/or nominate more affluent candidates. Ambition is an important possibility, but it is not the only hypothesis left to test.

Survey Data from the Americas

To test whether working-class potential candidates exhibit less nascent ambition, we analyzed questions on 10 national surveys across the Americas, including 13,535 respondents and covering eight countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, the US, and

Uruguay.³ The surveys were fielded by an academic research center between 2017 and 2019 (see Table A1 for fieldwork dates) and they include four probability-based face-to-face surveys and six nonprobability online surveys.⁴

These eight countries were ideal for studying class ambition gaps. In all eight—like in most democracies—working-class people are numerically underrepresented in their legislatures. As Table 1 illustrates, working-class people make up between 54 and 89 percent of the labor force in these countries, but in their national legislatures, only between 2 and 17 percent of

³ Argentina was surveyed three times, but the questions on each survey varied, so we analyze all three here and report results disaggregated to the individual survey to ensure that the inclusion of multiple Argentine surveys does not bias our findings.

⁴ Section A of the Appendix provides additional information on survey methodologies and compares the samples to population demographics. Our analysis of the nonprobability online samples uses trimmed weights constructed by raking over distributions on gender, age group, and education. Our pooled analyses also weight each country equally. Unweighted, our online samples over-represent respondents at higher levels of education—because online panels in less-affluent countries often have fewer panelists at lower levels of education (Castorena et al. Forthcoming). However, the fact that our nonprobability samples yield results similar to our probability samples is reassuring. Moreover, adding controls for education to our models does not change our basic findings (see Figure A3). Most importantly, our conclusions are the same when we disaggregate our results by individual surveys.

Table 1. Country comparison (c. 2017)

| | AR | BO | BR | CL | CO | MX | US | UY |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|
| Worker representation | | | | | | | | |
| Working-class proportion of adult population | 73 | 89 | 74 | 78 | 66 | 83 | 54 | 76 |
| Proportion of national legislators drawn from working class | 8 | 17 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 10 | 2 | 17 |
| Political variables | | | | | | | | |
| Years of democracy (since 1800) | 34 | 36 | 33 | 29 | 61 | 21 | 209 | 33 |
| Electoral system | PR | Maj | PR | Maj | PR | Maj | Maj | PR |
| Average district magnitude, lower house | 11 | 2 | 19 | 2 | 5 | 81 | 1 | 5 |
| Legislative fractionalization | 0.82 | 0.48 | 0.93 | 0.53 | 0.85 | 0.76 | 0.50 | 0.63 |
| Candidate nomination | Mixed | Party | Party | Party | Party | Party | Primary | Party |
| Legislative gender quota | 30% | 50% | 30% | 40% | 30% | 50% | 0% | 37% |
| Socioeconomic context | | | | | | | | |
| Economic development (ranking) | 62 | 117 | 85 | 59 | 86 | 68 | 10 | 65 |
| Human Development Index (ranking) | 46 | 107 | 84 | 43 | 83 | 76 | 17 | 55 |
| Female labor force participation | 57 | 61 | 60 | 57 | 85 | 47 | 68 | 68 |
| Unionization rate | 28 | 39 | 19 | 20 | 10 | 13 | 10 | 30 |
| Disposable income inequality (Gini) | 37.5 | 41.3 | 48.3 | 45.8 | 46.4 | 43.4 | 38.5 | 36.0 |

Sources: Carnes and Lupu (2015); Database of Political Institutions; Hughes et al. (2019); International IDEA; International Labor Organization; Polity; V-Dem; Solt (2020).

elected representatives held working-class occupations prior to entering politics.⁵ In each of these countries, something is keeping working-class people from holding office.

Importantly, these eight countries differ in terms of economic and political factors that may condition both nascent ambition and working-class representation. As Table 1 illustrates, while most are third-wave democracies, they also include first- (US) and second-wave

⁵ These figures come from Carnes and Lupu (2015), who measure the working-class proportion of the labor force using data from the International Labor Organization on laborers, service industry workers, and union staffers, and the proportion of legislators with working-class backgrounds using data from surveys that asked legislators their primary occupations when they were elected.

democracies (Colombia). The political systems of these countries run the gamut from majoritarian to proportional, two-party to multiparty, with varying legislative gender quotas. Partly because of these differences, these countries also use different methods to nominate candidates. Even among countries where parties determine candidacy, there is a great deal of variation (e.g., whether national leaders or local committees nominate). These countries also vary economically. Unionization rates are far higher in Bolivia and Uruguay than in Colombia and the US, possibly affecting how workers are socialized and how parties recruit candidates. Women participate much more in the labor force in some countries than others. Finally, these countries differ considerably in overall economic and human development and income inequality.

Together, these countries cover a wide range of the variation on the political, social, and economic variables that might affect both who has nascent political ambition and whether working-class people hold office. This allows us to effectively control for these factors and to isolate the relationship between nascent ambition and working-class officeholding (Gerring 2007). Despite being very different on so many dimensions, all of these countries have a pronounced shortage of working-class people in public office. If we similarly find class gaps in nascent ambition across them, this would be strong evidence that ambition gaps help explain why workers are under-represented across modern democracies.

To be consistent with past research on this topic, both in the US and elsewhere, we focus not on the entire population, but rather on subgroups who are *potential candidates*, people who are well-suited to run for office. As Gulzar (2021, 5) notes, “Scholars [of ambition] select a study population that is already a high-ability one relative to the entire population of office-eligible citizens.” If we focused on the entire population, any ambition gaps we observed could be an artifact of the uneven distribution of potential candidates. Zeroing in on people who are eligible

and well-suited to run for office is how studies of nascent ambition address this problem.

One way scholars have done so has been to focus on respondents from the white-collar professions that supply most political candidates (e.g., Lawless and Fox 2005). However, since we are interested in comparing individuals who are in pipeline professions (white-collar or professional jobs) to those who are in other lines of work (working-class jobs), we cannot use this strategy for identifying potential candidates. Likewise for research that has used college attainment as a proxy for eligibility (e.g., Holman and Schneider 2018; Shames 2017).

Instead, we identify potential candidates using two alternative approaches. First, we follow Carnes (2018) and use survey items that asked whether respondents believed they had qualities that voters and party leaders most often say they want in a politician (without telling them that these qualities are related to politics): self-confidence, a strong work ethic, an ability to learn new things quickly, an outgoing personality, honesty, public speaking skills, and loyalty to their political party.⁶ These seven items essentially allow us to define potential candidates via

⁶ The question asked, “Which of the following phrases describes you? (1) I am very sure of myself, (2) I am hardworking, (3) I am good at learning new things quickly, (4) I am outgoing, (5) I am honest, (6) I am good at public speaking, (7) I am very dedicated to my political party.” The order of the traits was randomized. One concern about multiple response questions like these is that respondents who rush through the survey may identify fewer traits. We find no evidence of this; the 2019 online survey in Argentina measured how long respondents spent on each question. When we ignore respondents who answered this question in under 20 seconds, the proportion of respondents who reported six or more traits is unchanged (6.4%, versus 6.0% in the full sample).

negation; we can remove from our sample people who self-report that they *do not* have the traits usually associated with officeholding—on the assumption that people who do not have many of these traits are less likely to have what Fowler and McClure (1990, 2) call, “some real prospect, however slim, of ending up in political office”—then study ambition gaps only among those who are left, which is a more defensible pool of potential candidates than the public as a whole.⁷ In our main analysis, we focus on respondents who had six or seven of these seven traits, but this cutoff is essentially arbitrary and we report similar results for other cutoffs in Figure A2.

As an alternative, we also identified potential candidates by asking respondents whether anyone had ever encouraged them to run for public office.⁸ This approach is similar to Gulzar and Khan’s (2018) strategy of asking respondents to nominate others who might run for office (here, we directly ask respondents themselves whether they have been encouraged). The measure is also conceptually related to another common proxy for identifying potential candidates—whether someone has ever run for office before—that is unfortunately not feasible to use in a study of nascent ambition (because everyone who has run for office in the past has had nascent ambition). If people who have run for office in the past can be defined as “higher quality” candidates, it seems reasonable to define people who have been encouraged to run for office as potential candidates. Of course, a person’s social class and gender may affect whether they are

⁷ Figure A1 plots the distributions of responses to these political trait questions across the countries where they were asked. In our pooled sample, 11.25% of respondents reported having six or seven traits.

⁸ Specifically, the question asked, “Has anyone ever personally encouraged you to run as a candidate in an election for public office?”

ever encouraged to run for office by elite actors like party leaders (e.g., Carnes 2018; Crowder-Meyer 2013). As such, we study respondents who have been encouraged by political actors (like politicians, media figures, and interest groups) and/or non-political actors (like friends and family), and we return below to the complex issue of what kinds of individuals become potential candidates.

To measure nascent ambition, we used a question similar to the measure Lawless and Fox use: “In the last few years, have you thought about running as a candidate in an election for public office, for example as a representative, mayor, or city council member?” This measure taps the personal “inclination to consider a candidacy” (Fox and Lawless 2005, 644) that has been found to be gender-biased.⁹ The text following “for example” refers to local offices and the office of “representative,” which could refer to national or, in some countries, state offices. This wording was helpful because most political candidates run for local, not national, office; by framing the examples of elected political offices in broad terms, we hoped to capture respondents who had considered running for office at any level.

To identify respondents from different social classes, we used three measures: occupation, household income, and wealth. *Household income* is a common measure in political science and was included on most of the surveys that included nascent ambition. However, income categories can conflate individuals with very different life chances and socialization experiences, and many respondents (around 20% in our Argentina surveys) refused to disclose

⁹ Importantly, as we show below, our measure replicates Lawless and Fox’s key findings regarding gender gaps, reassuring us that we are studying nascent ambition in a way that is consistent with past work.

their income. As such, researchers in less-affluent countries sometimes measure respondent *wealth* using a series of questions about household goods: whether the household has a microwave, a flat-screen TV, etc. (Córdova 2008; Filmer and Pritchett 2001). This measure is a useful complement to household income, but of course it may still conflate people from different classes.¹⁰

Our preferred measure of class is *occupation*, consistent with prior studies of class representation (e.g., Carnes and Lupu 2015; O’Grady 2018). However, asking about occupation on a survey entails a cumbersome question with a large number of complex response options and specific interviewer training. Given questionnaire space constraints, only a handful of the surveys we studied asked about occupations.

In our analyses, we compare working-class respondents (those who reported that they were employed in manual labor, service industry, clerical, labor union, and informal sector jobs)

¹⁰ In analyses of survey data from less-affluent countries, education is sometimes used as a proxy for class. But there are also good reasons to worry about its validity: many affluent business owners spend little time attaining formal schooling. In our surveys, education was not closely correlated with occupation or household income. Moreover, studying education would not have increased the number of surveys available to us; the surveys that included education also included income, wealth, and/or occupation. As such, we do not include education as a class proxy, although research on the educational backgrounds of politicians is itself important (e.g., Bovens and Wille 2017).

Table 2. Surveys, sample sizes, and items

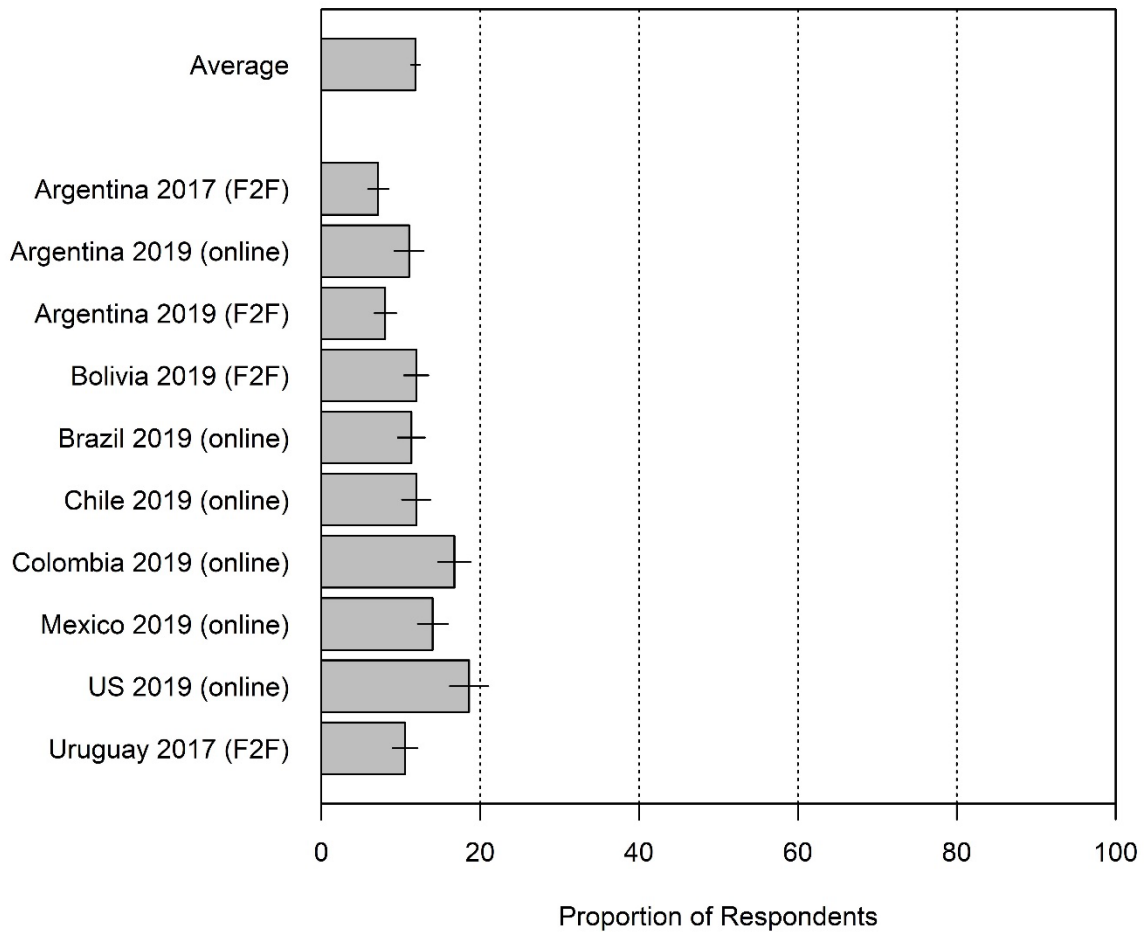
| Country | Year | Mode | N | Nascent Ambition | Potential Candidate Proxies | | Economic Background | | | Gender |
|-----------|------|--------|-------|---------------------|--------------------------------|---------|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| | | | | | Pol. Traits | Encour. | Income | Wealth | Occup. | |
| Argentina | 2017 | F2F | 1,524 | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Argentina | 2019 | Online | 1,119 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Argentina | 2019 | F2F | 1,527 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Bolivia | 2019 | F2F | 1,682 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Brazil | 2019 | Online | 1,299 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Chile | 2019 | Online | 1,276 | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Colombia | 2019 | Online | 1,298 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Mexico | 2019 | Online | 1,299 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| US | 2019 | Online | 991 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Uruguay | 2017 | F2F | 1,514 | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

to non-workers (e.g., professionals),¹¹ lower-income respondents (those who reported that they were in the bottom half of the income distribution in a given survey) to higher-income respondents (those in the top half), lower-wealth respondents (those in the bottom three quintiles of the country-specific wealth measure provided in these surveys) to higher-wealth respondents (those in the top two quintiles), and female and male respondents. Section B of the Appendix provides the wording of all the questions in our analysis.

Not every question we studied was included on every survey. Nascent ambition was included on all 10 surveys along with at least one of the three economic measures, but our preferred measure, occupation, was only included on three of the surveys. Reassuringly, our results are similar regardless of which economic measure we use. The seven-question battery of potential candidate attributes was included on eight surveys, and the encouragement question was included on six surveys. Table 2 summarizes which items appeared on each of the 10

¹¹ Appendix Table A7 lists the survey occupation categories and how they were coded as working-class or other professions.

Figure 1. *Nascent ambition, by survey*



Note: Bars report percentages of respondents who said they had considered running for office in recent years. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

surveys.

The data on nascent ambition were remarkably consistent across the eight countries and 10 surveys we analyzed (see Figure 1). In general, the vast majority of people do not exhibit nascent ambition; in the average survey, 12% of respondents said they had considered running

for office in the prior few years. Across individual surveys, this figure ranged from 7% to 19%.¹²

Importantly for our purposes, the two proxies for identifying potential candidates—the seven-trait battery and the encouragement measure—did not eliminate respondents from underrepresented groups. That is, these samples of potential candidates still include working-class, lower-income, lower-wealth, and female respondents. Table A3 reports simple regression models that relate our potential candidate measures—an indicator for respondents who reported 6 or 7 traits, and an indicator for respondents who reported encouragement—to indicators for our economic and gender measures (each entered separately).¹³ As we might expect, the encouragement indicator varies more across the groups we study (the estimated differences by occupation, income, wealth, and gender are all statistically significant and greater than 20% of the sample mean); this finding is in line with past research documenting gender and social class biases on the part of candidate recruiters (Carnes 2018; Crowder-Meyer 2013). Even so, there were reasonably large shares (between 10% and 14%) of working-class, lower-income, lower-wealth, and female respondents who were encouraged to run, and on average those respondents

¹² There were obvious minor differences by mode: online surveys elicited slightly higher rates of nascent ambition than face-to-face, perhaps because added privacy made respondents less modest. But the overall variation across surveys and countries was quite muted. Argentina—which was surveyed three times using two formats—is an instructive example. The two face-to-face surveys elicited similar rates of nascent ambition (7.1% and 8.0%) despite being conducted two years apart; the 2019 online survey elicited an 11.0% rate, a modest three percentage points higher than the face-to-face 2019 survey.

¹³ We also estimate these models with country-level controls (Table A4), with similar results.

should be more likely to have some potential to run and win than people who have never been encouraged, so we see this as a valid proxy.

The trait-based proxy performed even better when viewed this way; three of the four estimated gaps were tiny and not statistically significant (income, wealth, and gender). The lone statistically significant gap was a three-percentage-point difference between workers and professionals (12% of workers and 15% of professionals said they had six or seven of the traits we asked about), but only two surveys asked questions about occupations and personal traits, so we are reluctant to read too much into this difference.¹⁴ These proxy variables leave us with large enough groups of potential candidates from underrepresented groups to ask whether they exhibit systematically lower rates of interest in running for elected office.

In the analyses that follow, we use both an indicator for respondents who reported having six or seven candidate traits and an indicator for those who reported encouragement as our proxies for potential candidates, but with the important caveat that we do so only for descriptive purposes; we are not asserting a positive theory that these attributes are exogenous to nascent ambition. Obviously, the relationship between demographic characteristics, personal traits, encouragement, and nascent ambition is complex (e.g., Allen and Cutts 2020; Bauer and Darkwah 2020; Josefsson 2020; Piscopo and Kenny 2020); here we are only interested in the “reduced-form” question of whether potential candidates from the working classes are less likely

¹⁴ Future work might consider whether there are “leaks in the pipeline” at the points in time when people develop the skills needed to succeed in elections, but it is also valuable to know whether the 12% of working-class people who have the traits we asked about were disproportionately unlikely to want to run for office.

to exhibit nascent ambition, setting aside the question of what makes someone a potential candidate, which may itself be endogenous to class and/or nascent ambition (especially when we use encouragement as a proxy for being a potential candidate). In this paper, we seek only to answer the question: among people who seem positioned to be candidates—those who have the traits parties and voters tend to like, or those who have been encouraged to run by others—are working-class people less likely to consider running? We leave questions about the larger causal relationship between class, traits, encouragement, and nascent ambition to future work and focus here on a question we think must be answered first.

Class and Nascent Ambition in the Americas

Do less-affluent potential candidates exhibit less nascent political ambition?¹⁵ Figure 2 plots the percentages of respondents who exhibited nascent ambition (that is, who answered yes when asked if they had thought about running for public office in the last few years). Each panel of the figure divides respondents by one of our economic variables or by gender. In each panel,

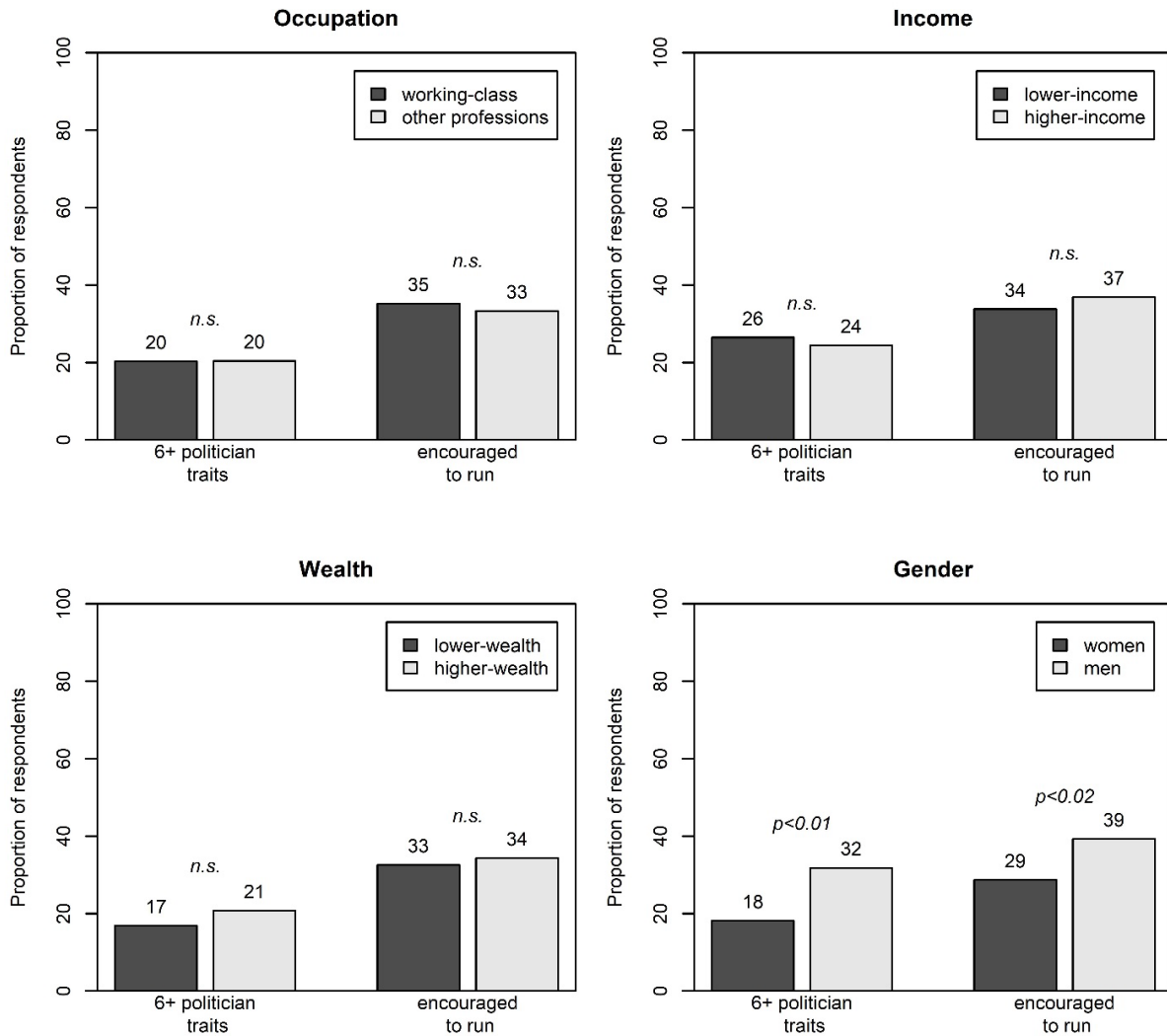
¹⁵ Consistent with the larger literature on politicians from the working class, women were not underrepresented in our less privileged economic categories. Among respondents with six or seven candidate traits, women made up 41% of workers (compared to 39% of non-workers), 51% of low-income respondents (compared to 43% of high-income), and 55% of low-wealth respondents (compared to 40% of high-wealth). Among respondents who were encouraged to run for office, women made up 39% of workers (compared to 33% of non-workers), 46% of low-income respondents (compared to 38% of high-income), and 45% of low-wealth respondents (compared to 37% of high-wealth).

the first pair of bars plots the rates of nascent ambition among respondents who self-reported that they had six or seven of the candidate traits we asked about, and the second pair of bars plots the rate among respondents who indicated that they had been encouraged to run for public office.

The estimates in Figure 2 come from simple regression models (reported in Table A5) that relate nascent ambition to one of the economic indicators (e.g., an indicator for respondents who were workers). Our models also include survey indicators to account for the modest differences in nascent ambition across surveys we saw in Figure 1. The different panels in Figure 2 compare working-class respondents to non-workers, lower-income to higher-income respondents, lower-wealth to higher-wealth respondents, and female to male respondents.

When we compared potential candidates from different social classes, we did not find significant differences that might help to explain why so few working-class citizens go on to hold elected office in the world's democracies. On the contrary, the economic gaps in the figure are small and often in the "wrong" direction. Income, wealth, and occupation are never statistically significant predictors of nascent ambition among potential candidates. (In the full pool of respondents, we did observe one economic measure that was associated with nascent ambition, namely, working-class occupation; see Table A5. This difference, however, would not satisfy the standard for identifying meaningful gaps in nascent ambition set by past research, because it disappeared when we limited the sample to higher-potential respondents, the standard practice in research on nascent ambition.)

Figure 2. Gaps in nascent ambition



Note: Values represent estimated percentages of respondents who reported that they had recently considered running for elected office from regression models relating this nascent ambition measure to the attribute in question (e.g., an indicator for working-class politicians) as well as survey fixed effects (to account for the differences documented in Figure 1), with standard errors clustered by survey. Complete regression results are reported in Table A5.

This was true even when we controlled for country-level variables that might influence nascent ambition among less-affluent respondents, such as economic inequality or electoral system. Table A8 re-estimates the models underlying Figure 2, this time replacing survey indicators with controls for the Gini coefficient in each country and indicators for countries that have proportional rather than majoritarian electoral systems. Using these controls did little to

change our original findings. This is partly because, as we show in Table A9, when we analyze each population separately—e.g., working-class respondents vs. non-working-class respondents—the associations between nascent ambition and country-level traits like inequality and electoral system are similar. For instance, in countries with higher inequality, less-affluent high-potential respondents express slightly higher rates of nascent ambition—but so do more-affluent high-potential respondents.

In sharp contrast, the well-studied gender gap in nascent ambition is clearly evident in our sample of high-potential respondents, just as it has been in many past studies of nascent ambition.¹⁶ Among potential candidates, women were 29 to 46 percent less likely to say that they had thought about running for office in the last few years.

Of course, pooling responses across a variety of countries and surveys is potentially problematic; ambition and/or social class may operate differently in different national contexts. However, looking at one survey at a time does not change our basic conclusions. Table 3 lists the ten surveys we analyzed. For each one, we focus on respondents with six or more of the seven

¹⁶ We also approximated Lawless and Fox’s methodology by focusing only on respondents who worked in professional occupations (e.g., ignoring working-class respondents), then computing the gender gap in nascent ambition. We found that women were 13 percentage points less likely to express nascent ambition, although the difference was just shy of conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < 0.055$).

Table 3. *Percentage-point gaps in nascent ambition, by survey*

| | Workers | Low-income | Low-wealth | Women |
|--|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <i>Among respondents with 6 or 7 candidate traits</i> | | | | |
| Argentina 2017 (F2F) | | | | |
| Argentina 2019 (online) | -9.2 | 12.5 | | -2.7 |
| Argentina 2019 (F2F) | | -1.5 | 0.5 | -11.2 |
| Bolivia 2019 (F2F) | -0.9 | -1.8 | -6.8 | -7.7 |
| Brazil 2019 (online) | | 16.1 | | -20.9 |
| Chile 2019 (online) | 16.5 | | | -18.4 |
| Colombia 2019 (online) | | -5.7 | | -25.3 |
| Mexico 2019 (online) | | 8.8 | | -16.0 |
| USA 2019 (online) | | -4.2 | | -6.0 |
| Uruguay 2017 (F2F) | | | | |
| <i>Among respondents who were previously encouraged to run</i> | | | | |
| Argentina 2017 (F2F) | | 2.5 | -6.8 | -16.7 |
| Argentina 2019 (online) | | | | |
| Argentina 2019 (F2F) | -4.8 | -3.8 | -4.4 | -13.2 |
| Bolivia 2019 (F2F) | 6.4 | -4.7 | -2.0 | 0.5 |
| Brazil 2019 (online) | | | | |
| Chile 2019 (online) | | | | |
| Colombia 2019 (online) | | 2.7 | | -11.9 |
| Mexico 2019 (online) | | 4.5 | | -17.6 |
| USA 2019 (online) | | | | |
| Uruguay 2017 (F2F) | | -15.4 | 3.3 | -11.3 |

Note: Cells report the difference between the percentage of members of the group in question (workers, lower-income respondents, lower-wealth respondents, and women) who exhibited nascent ambition and the percentage among the group’s complement (professionals, higher-income respondents, higher-wealth respondents, and men). Estimates are taken from regression models relating nascent ambition measure to the attribute in question (e.g., an indicator for working-class politicians). Complete regression results are reported in Table A6. Bolded estimates are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

candidate traits (top panel) or respondents who indicated that they had previously been encouraged to run for office (bottom panel) and estimated the economic and gender ambition gaps among them. Occupation, income, and wealth do not consistently predict expected differences in nascent ambition; to the contrary, two of the three statistically significant differences are in the “wrong” direction (lower-income respondents were significantly more likely to report that they had considered running for office). In the remaining surveys,

occupation-, income-, and wealth-based differences in nascent ambition were statistically insignificant, usually substantively small, and about as likely to be positive as negative.

Even the variation across countries offers little reassurance. Of the countries in our sample, Bolivia and Uruguay exhibit the highest levels of worker representation in the national legislature (see Table 1). But our results for Bolivia (none of them statistically significant) are very similar to the rest of the sample. Paradoxically, Uruguay turns out to be the only case in which we find a statistically significant, negative relationship between class and nascent ambition, although only with the income measure.¹⁷ Nascent ambition gaps do not seem to be a likely explanation for shortage of politicians from the working class.

In Table 3, gender is again a strong predictor of gaps in nascent ambition: in 13 of the 14 gender estimates in Table 3, nascent ambition was lower among female potential candidates than among male potential candidates, and 8 of those 13 gaps were statistically significant at the 95% confidence threshold. Viewed this way, the gender gap in nascent ambition appears to be remarkably consistent across countries in the Americas. But we find no evidence that the same is true for class in the same data.

Given the robustness of the association between gender and nascent ambition, as a final test of our main findings, we reran the models in Figure 2 that had the largest gender gaps (those

¹⁷ We should also note that the data on worker representation in Table 1 refer to the national legislature, while our survey question on nascent ambition includes whether respondents thought about running for local office. If worker descriptive representation looks different at the local and national levels within countries, then we cannot directly compare these two measures.

estimated using respondents with six or seven candidate traits),¹⁸ this time using indicators for less-affluent women, more-affluent women, and less-affluent men, separately for each economic measure. More-privileged men were the omitted reference category.

Our findings suggest that the gender gap in nascent ambition is orthogonal to the economic (non)differences we observed. The female “penalties” in these models were remarkably similar regardless of women’s economic status: relative to a male professional potential candidate, a female professional potential candidate was 19 percentage points less likely to express nascent ambition, and a female working-class potential candidate was 16 percentage points less likely. Likewise, relative to a higher-income male potential candidate, a higher-income female potential candidate was 13 percentage points less likely and lower-income female potential candidate was 11 percentage points less likely. And relative to a higher-wealth male potential candidate, a higher-wealth woman was 7 percentage points less likely and a lower-wealth woman was 11 percentage points less likely. The female “penalty” in nascent ambition seemed to be roughly the same regardless of whether women were ranked higher or lower economically. In contrast, relative to more-affluent men, less-affluent men were just 2 percentage points less likely (when looking at occupation), 4 percentage points more likely (when looking at income), and 2 percentage points less likely (when looking at wealth) to report that they had thought about running for office. In these data, there was a gender gap that transcended social class; even looking at the two characteristics together, it is gender, not class, that seems to predict differences in whether potential candidates consider running for office.

¹⁸ The results were substantively similar when we used the encouragement proxy instead of the candidate trait proxy to identify potential candidates.

Conclusion

Consistent with many previous studies, the surveys we analyzed found substantial gender gaps in nascent ambition in the Americas. They did not, however, find similar gaps along class lines. Using our simple measures to identify potential candidates, there are about as many female potential candidates as there are male, and about as many less-affluent candidates as there are more-affluent ones. But whereas female potential candidates are less likely to consider running for public office relative to male potential candidates, lower-income, lower-wealth, and working-class potential candidates are about as likely to consider running as more affluent potential candidates. Something keeps the less privileged around the world from running for office, but this study finds no clear evidence that it is a lack of nascent political ambition.

Of course, we should note several important caveats. First, these data come from just eight countries and 10 surveys, and our economic background measures were asked only sporadically across the surveys. Although this study uses the largest sample of nascent ambition data ever collected, even larger samples extended to different contexts or more consistently-fielded economic measures could yield different results.

Our samples, for instance, include many developing democracies, in which we tend to see less social class inequality when it comes to political participation (e.g., Boulding and Holzner 2021; Kasara and Suryanarayan 2015). Although we do not see clear evidence of a relationship between ambition gaps and national levels of wealth and development in our data, perhaps future studies will, or perhaps future studies focused only on wealthier countries will find evidence of social class gaps in nascent ambition only in those contexts.

As it stands, however, the available empirical evidence suggests that nascent ambition—a

pillar of research on the shortage of women in elected office—may not be a consequential factor in the global underrepresentation of less-affluent and working-class citizens. Something keeps workers around the world out of office, but it does not seem to be a lack of interest.

Future research might therefore consider a wider range of potential obstacles. So far, studies have focused largely on voter biases, differences in ability, and now differences in nascent ambition. Although the case is hardly closed on any of these explanations, we have little so far in the way of a concrete explanation for the global phenomenon of working-class exclusion from elected political office.

If ambition gaps are not responsible for the shortage of working-class people in elected office, what might the cause be? One potentially fruitful way forward is to examine whether social and institutional differences across contexts matter. Even within the eight cases we study, while workers are under-represented in all of them, there is some variation across countries. Future research might use that variation with data on a larger sample of countries to explore these possibilities.

We might also learn that what keeps working-class people out of politics is actually more universal. Obstacles like resource constraints and elite gatekeeping are obvious possibilities: perhaps working-class citizens are less likely to be able to shoulder the burdens associated with campaigning or to receive support from parties and civic groups. In some economies, it is difficult to imagine how working-class people might afford to forego enough time and income to participate in electoral campaigns. As for recruitment, in one auxiliary analysis for the present study, we found that working-class, lower-income, lower-wealth, and female respondents were less likely to report that they were encouraged to run for office (see Table A3), consistent with past research on gender and officeholding (e.g., Crowder-Meyer 2013).

Whereas research on voter biases and nascent ambition helped scholars understand the shortage of women in elected office, the results of this study suggest that if we wish to understand why democracies consistently elect the privileged, scholars will likely need to consider alternative explanations like recruitment, gatekeeping, and resource constraints.

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