

How Dispositional Empathy Influences Political Ambition

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ABSTRACT: Political representation is fundamentally about advancing the needs and interests of others. Empathy – the ability to share others’ feelings and perspectives – ought to be a critical skill for effective representation. Yet, the conflict, negativity, and competition that are endemic to politics may prevent empathetic individuals from seeking office. Using an original national survey with an oversample of people who have run for office, we explore how citizens’ dispositional empathy influences political ambition. We show that perspective-taking increases ambition, while personal distress depresses ambition. By analyzing feelings towards several different aspects of running for and holding political office, we show the mechanisms through which empathy affects ambition. Finally, we demonstrate that experimentally manipulated perceptions of campaign context moderate the effects of empathy on ambition. Our results provide new insight into how psychological factors interact with political context to shape ambition and hold important implications for the quality of representation.

Running Header: Dispositional Empathy and Political Ambition

Key Words: Political Ambition; Empathy; Campaigns; Perspective-Taking; Personal Distress; Empathic Concern

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“There’s a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit – the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us – the child who’s hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.”

– President Barack Obama, *Commencement Address at Northwestern University (June 19, 2006)*

Politicians’ tendencies to experience empathy – to understand or feel what another person is experiencing – undoubtedly affect how they represent their constituents and serve on the behalf of others. Empathy should influence the policies that representatives support in a variety of ways. For example, empathy decreases willingness to sacrifice individuals for the greater good (e.g. Conway and Gawronski 2013) and shapes distributional preferences (Kogut and Ritov 2005). Empathy should also impact a politician’s ability to enact those policies. Empathy facilitates conflict resolution, negotiation, and compromise (Galinsky et al. 2008), and Senators who display traits such as empathy, are more influential (Ten Brinke et al. 2015). And while empathy may not always lead to normatively desirable outcomes,¹ it remains one of the main traits that the public desires in politicians (Hayes 2005).

But despite the potential for empathy to affect political outcomes, very little is known about the actual levels of empathy among those seeking and holding political office. Public opinion data suggest that many perceive an empathy deficit in U.S. politics. Both parties are perceived as being “out of touch with the concerns of most people” by a majority of the public (Bump 2017), and 74% of the public says most politicians “don’t care what people like me think” (Pew Research Center 2015). In addition, individuals from affluent, white-collar backgrounds are both the least likely to display empathy and the most likely to run for office (e.g., Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010; Carnes 2013). Thus, while empathy may be desirable among politicians, many perceive it to be lacking.

If such an empathic deficit exists, it can likely be traced back to the initial formation of political ambition. While the political opportunity structure is important (e.g. Schlesinger 1966; Black

¹ See Bloom (2016) for a critique of empathy.

1972; Stone and Maisel 2003), before engaging in a strategic assessment of the costs and benefits of running for office, a citizen must first be politically ambitious (Maestas et al. 2006; Fox and Lawless 2005). Surveys of potential candidates find that this early ambition is linked to a number of sociodemographic, background, and motivational factors (Fox and Lawless 2005, 2011; Lawless 2012), seemingly supporting the conception of a “political type” (Lasswell 1948; see also Browning and Jacob 1964; Barber 1965). That is, there seems to be certain characteristics that differentiate those who desire political office from those who do not. Given that dispositional empathy affects one’s ability and willingness to engage in many activities that are central to political representation, such as debate, negotiation, and advocacy, it seems likely that empathy also affects political ambition. Because the public desires empathic politicians, and empathy is linked to many normatively desirable (and undesirable) behaviors, it is important to explore whether empathy is part of the “political type.” As such, we build upon these prior works by offering the first examination of how dispositional empathy (or a lack thereof) affects the formation of political ambition.

We proceed by outlining a theory of how and why empathy plays an important role in both aversion and attraction to different aspects of political campaigns and office holding. These specific feelings of aversion and attraction in turn motivate individuals’ desire to enter the political arena. Using an original survey, we find that aspects of empathy influence individuals’ feelings about campaign negativity, the prospects of policymaking, and feelings about publicity, each of which shape their political ambition. We then leverage an oversample of individuals who have run for office in the past to test whether they have different empathic dispositions than those who have not, even after controlling for common measures of personality. Finally, we provide an experimental test of how political context interacts with empathic dispositions to shape ambition. Overall, our results provide new insights into the psychological motivations behind political ambition, holding important implications for the quality of representation and the design of electoral processes.

Dispositional Empathy and Political Ambition

Surveys suggest that many citizens believe that the politically ambitious are operating from some sort of empathic deficit. But such a hypothesis may be overly simplistic, as both empathy and ambition are complex concepts. To this point, we have been discussing empathy as though it were only state- rather than trait-based and unidimensional. However, people systematically vary in their propensity to engage in empathic responding (Davis 1983). These dispositions are highly stable throughout the lifespan (Davis & Franzoi 1991) and appear to be heritable (Davis et al. 1994). Empathy is a contested concept, but is widely considered to be multidimensional (e.g., Batson and Ahmad 2009; Davis 1983; Decety and Svetlova 2012). The most influential typology of empathy identifies three distinct dimensions that may impact political ambition: empathic concern, personal distress, and perspective-taking.² Each dimension represents an “ability to perceive, share and understand others’ affective states” (Decety and Svetlova 2012, 2). Yet, the different dimensions are only weakly to moderately correlated with each other and have distinct behavioral consequences.

The formation of political ambition is itself a complex process influenced by numerous features of the electoral and legislative environments. Focusing predominantly on gender, recent work suggests that individuals are differentially attracted to or repelled from multiple aspects of political life. For example, a recent economic experiment finds evidence of “election aversion,” suggesting that a dislike for the prospect of having to use or endure dishonest campaign tactics may discourage some from entering the political arena (Kanthak and Woon 2015). Priming the competitive nature of political office may also drive down ambition (Preece & Stoddard 2015), while

² There is also a fourth dimension, fantasy, which involves the tendency to transpose oneself into fictional characters. However, fantasy is rarely studied and does not have clear implications for political behavior. Thus, we do not provide expectations for how fantasy influences ambition, but we do account for it empirically throughout our analyses.

emphasizing the communal goals, as opposed to power and conflict, can reverse this effect (Schneider et al. 2015). And the prospects of crafting policy or assuming leadership roles also has two-sided effects, both drawing and deterring individuals from political life (Ertac and Gurdal 2012).

These aspects of political life likely systematically attract and deter certain types of personalities to political office. Indeed, there is some evidence that certain personality types, as measured according to the Big Five framework, are more attracted to political office (Dynes, Hassell, and Miles 2016). While the Big Five framework is useful for understanding political ambition, dispositional empathy captures different aspects of personality – namely the emotional and cognitive reactions to others’ experiences.³ These empathic aspects of personality are particularly relevant to political representation. For example, empathy is closely tied to normatively important behaviors, such as moral judgment (e.g., Gleichgerrcht and Young 2013), unethical and illegal behavior (Cohen 2010; Martinez, Stuewig, and Tangney 2014), and charitable giving (e.g., Wilhelm and Bekkers 2010). As we show below, empathy is empirically distinct from the Big Five traits and helps explain ambition beyond these traits. In the next section, we discuss each dimension of empathy in turn and connect them to specific aspects of running for or holding office that might be particularly attractive or aversive to individuals high on that dimension.

Ambition and Empathic Concern

³ The Big Five traits are understood as broad, overarching traits, but nonetheless are not exhaustive descriptors of personality (John and Srivastava 1999). Each dimension of empathy is indeed related to the Big Five traits, but they are empirically distinct (see Appendix A and F). Moreover, empathy focuses specifically on sharing others’ feelings and perspectives, while the Big Five do not.

The dimension of empathy with the largest prosocial behavioral consequences is *empathic concern*. Empathic concern refers to other-oriented emotions that are congruent with someone in need (Davis 1983). Empathic concern is not about directly sharing the emotional state of another person, but reacting to another's suffering with feelings of sympathy and compassion. As a result, people high in empathic concern are more likely to take active steps to alleviate the suffering of others (Wilhelm and Bekkers 2010). Empathic concern also decreases immoral behavior, such as criminal activity (Martinez, Stuewig, and Tangney 2014) and unethical bargaining tactics (Cohen 2010). Thus, empathic concern would seem to be normatively desirable among officeholders, though conventional wisdom would suggest it is in short supply.

It is tempting to think that those high in empathic concern will prefer to avoid adversarial politics. However, empathic concern motivates people to take action to reduce harm, rather than to avoid it. Thus, we do *not* expect that others' harmful behavior, such as negative campaigning, will deter those high in empathic concern. However, empathic concern should undermine an individual's willingness to *personally* engage in these behaviors. We expect that the lower propensity to engage in unethical business strategies (Cohen 2010) will transfer to the political domain as well. Hence, empathic concern may decrease political ambition due to an unwillingness to engage in negative campaigning or other harmful behaviors that are sometimes a part of politics.

Empathic concern is distinguished by feelings of compassion, and we expect those feelings to make the prosocial aspects of politics more appealing. The public platform provided by running for or holding office offers an opportunity to represent others' interests. And once elected, there are opportunities to craft policy and distribute resources. Thus, we expect that empathic concern will be positively related to individuals' desire to make public policy and represent others' views, but negatively related to engaging in cutthroat campaign strategies. Taken together, these competing

effects may cancel out, leading to a small or null total effect on ambition, and thus reducing the likelihood of a deficit in empathic concern among officeholders.

Ambition and Personal Distress

Personal distress captures a fundamental aspect of empathy – emotional contagion, or the tendency to feel what others are feeling (Decety and Yoder 2016).⁴ People high in personal distress tend to react to others' distress with feelings of discomfort and anxiety (Davis 1983). It is often easiest to reduce these self-oriented negative emotions by avoidance rather than helping behavior. As a result, personal distress is often unrelated (Graziano et al. 2007) or even negatively related to prosocial behavior (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987). Thus, while empathic concern spurs engagement with a stressor, personal distress typically promotes avoidance.

Given the highly public and contentious nature of political office, people high in personal distress should find a political career particularly unappealing. Many aspects of political office, such as media coverage, debate, and negotiation should be aversive to people high in personal distress, even if they are not being personally attacked. Even policymaking and constituent service, which may involve responding to appeals for help, might be off-putting to those high in personal distress.

⁴ Some restrict the definition of empathy to this narrow sense of emotional contagion. We rely on Davis's multidimensional typology for several reasons. First, it is the dominant approach in psychology and nearly every common theory posits a similar multidimensional framework (e.g., Batson and Ahmad 2009; Davis 1983; Decety and Svetlova 2012). Second, each dimension of empathy shares both a core feature of the individual's reaction to another's emotional state and overlapping psychological processes. And third, leaving out other dimensions of empathy would ignore some of the most important effects of empathy on morality and intergroup behavior (e.g., Decety & Yoder, 2016).

As such, we expect that personal distress is negatively related to virtually all aspects of office holding and campaigning, and in turn, to political ambition itself.

Ambition and Perspective-Taking

Perspective-taking is a more cognitive form of empathy that refers to an individual's tendency to adopt the frame of reference of another person, which "allows an individual to anticipate the behavior and reactions of others" (Davis 1983, 115). Indeed, imagining the perspective of another activates a similar set of neural responses as do first-person experiences (Lamm, Batson, and Decety 2007). This tendency to merge the perspectives of self and others brings about a number of social benefits. Perspective-takers are less likely to stereotype (Wang et al. 2013), are more tolerant of disagreement (Mutz 2004), and tend to give more weight to advice from others, leading to better decision-making (Yaniv and Choshen-Hillel 2012). All of these behaviors would seem to be desirable among political representatives.

Yet, the consequences of perspective-taking are not universally desirable; perspective-taking can instead be understood as a "relational amplifier" (Pierce et al. 2013). By moving beyond one's own point of view, perspective-taking enhances the cooperative or competitive nature of a relationship. People high in perspective-taking are more capable at bargaining and negotiating (Galinsky et al. 2008), but more selfish and more willing to engage in unethical behavior in competitive contexts (Epley, Caruso, and Bazerman 2006; Pierce et al. 2013). In this sense, perspective-taking is useful for understanding and influencing others, for good or for bad.

Nonetheless, the ability to see the world from another's viewpoint should be a useful skill in politics. Perspective-taking should facilitate strategic aspects of politics, such as policy debate and coalition-building, making these tasks relatively more appealing. As a result, we expect that those high in perspective-taking will find aspects of office holding like argumentation, bargaining, and strategic behavior relatively appealing, which will in turn result in higher levels of ambition.

Overall, we expect empathy to drive both positive and negative reactions to various aspects of running for and holding office, which should in turn influence general political ambition. Table 1 offers a brief summary of our expectations. In the next section, we use a national survey to examine how empathy influences ambition. We then utilize an oversample of respondents who have run for office to test whether their empathic dispositions differ from the rest of the population. Finally, we conduct an experimental test of whether priming different aspects of politics moderates the relationship between empathy and ambition.

Table 1: Summary of Expectations

Dimension of Empathy	Expected Views of Campaigning and Office Holding	Expected Relationship with Ambition
Empathic Concern: <i>feeling compassion on behalf of another</i>	Feelings for others should inspire action and make working on their behalf appealing. Conversely, the prospect of causing harm via negative campaign or debate tactics should be unattractive.	Unclear, as both positive and negative aspects may cancel each other out.
Personal Distress: <i>directly sharing the feelings of another</i>	Sharing feelings with others in a tense and competitive context should cause discomfort and lead to general dislike for all aspects of political life.	Negative
Perspective-Taking: <i>sharing the cognitive perspective of another</i>	Sharing perspectives with others should make the tactical, debate, and negotiation aspects of politics attractive.	Positive

National Study

For our primary study, we rely on an original survey fielded by YouGov in May 2016. The sample consists of 1,000 respondents matched to the general population and an oversample of 300

respondents who have run for political office.⁵ Rather than focusing on elites, we follow recent work on nascent ambition that studies ambition formation among the general public (e.g., Fox and Lawless 2014; Kanthak and Woon 2015). General population studies of nascent ambition allow us to understand why citizens develop the interest in running for office in the first place, a necessary condition for any step that leads toward candidacy. Additionally, our oversample improves on this design by allowing for comparisons of those who have run for office with those who have not.⁶

Our key independent variables are measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), a widely used and well-validated measure of dispositional empathy (Davis 1983; Davis & Franzoi 1991). The IRI consists of 28 questions, with seven items devoted to each facet of empathy discussed above.⁷ Respondents are asked to rate how well statements describe themselves on a five-point scale. Statements include “I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other guy’s point of view” (perspective-taking, reversed), “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them” (empathic concern), and “Being in a tense emotional situation scares me” (personal distress). Following past work, we averaged items from each subscale and rescaled them to range from 0 to 1 (perspective-taking: $\alpha = .77$, $M = .63$; empathic concern: $\alpha = .77$, $M = .69$; personal distress: $\alpha = .83$, $M = .33$).⁸

⁵ Our sample includes 331 respondents who have sought elected office before, including 185 who have been elected to office (mostly city and local offices; see Appendix B.)

⁶ To account for respondent satisficing, we embedded an attention check in the survey grids used to measure empathy (e.g., Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances 2013). Eleven percent of the sample ($n = 153$) failed the attention check and are excluded from our analyses (see Appendix C for details).

⁷ The scale also includes seven items to measure fantasy, a dimension not discussed here.

⁸ We also average the fantasy subscale ($\alpha = .78$, $M = .54$) for use as a control.

Consistent with past work, the three dimensions of empathy are only moderately correlated with each other (average absolute $r = .25$; see Appendix A for details). Dispositional empathy is also only moderately correlated with the Big Five traits (average absolute $r = .23$; see Appendix A), suggesting that empathy is distinct from these more commonly studied personality traits. Our measures of empathy are also related to demographic characteristics in predictable ways. Men tend to score lower in all three dimensions of empathy, particularly empathic concern and personal distress. Education is positively associated with perspective-taking, and negatively related to personal distress. And finally, older respondents tend to score higher in empathic concern, but lower in personal distress. Taken together, these results reaffirm that the dimensions of the IRI are capturing unique variance in personality.

Our first set of dependent variables consist of respondents' feelings towards ten aspects of running for office (e.g., "being the target of negative campaigning") and holding office (e.g., "the opportunity to change policy"). Our items were drawn from prior research (Schneider et al. 2015; Lawless 2012) and are intended to represent the broad range of activities in which candidates and representatives must engage. Response options range from "very negative" (1) to "very positive" (7). Our second set of dependent variables consist of a series of questions asking respondents how likely they would be to run for a political office if they were asked.⁹ The seven offices range from school board up to the U.S. Senate. Response options range from "not likely at all" (1) to "extremely likely

⁹ We take this approach because our interest is in general latent ambition, not responses to the political opportunity structure. Although recruitment can affect who is ambitious (Butler and Preece 2016; Preece, Stoddard, and Fisher 2016), we find similar results when using alternative measures that do not use recruitment language (see Appendix G). We also find no evidence that the experimental manipulation of recruitment language affects the relationship between ambition and empathy (see Appendix G).

(5).¹⁰ In the Appendix, we provide details of all measures (Appendix B) and evidence that these questions correspond with political engagement and capture meaningful variation in nascent ambition (Appendix D).

Results: Empathy and Aspects of Political Life

We begin by analyzing respondents' feelings towards different aspects of running for and holding office. We restrict these analyses to the main sample, though results are similar when including the oversample. Responses are coded so that higher values indicate more favorable ratings. Each of the ten aspects is modeled using an ordered logit model as a function of *Personal Distress*, *Empathic Concern*, and *Perspective-Taking*. Following previous literature (e.g. Fox and Lawless 2005), we control for important background factors: strength of partisanship, education, income, age, race, gender, marital status, and employment status.¹¹

We summarize the results for each aspect of empathy. The odds ratios for each domain of empathy predicting each aspect of office are shown in Figure 1.¹² Odds ratios are plotted on a logarithmic scale in order to facilitate visual interpretation of effect sizes (such that two equivalent effect sizes – e.g., 0.1 and 10 – are shown as the same distance from a null effect of 1). Statistically significant effects ($p < .05$, two-tailed) are shown in black, while non-significant effects are shown in gray. The large number of outcomes raises a multiple comparisons problem, however, controlling the false discovery rate (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995) only changes one of our substantive conclusions, which we note below.

¹⁰ Mean ratings on these seven questions range from 1.37 (governor) to 1.81 (city council).

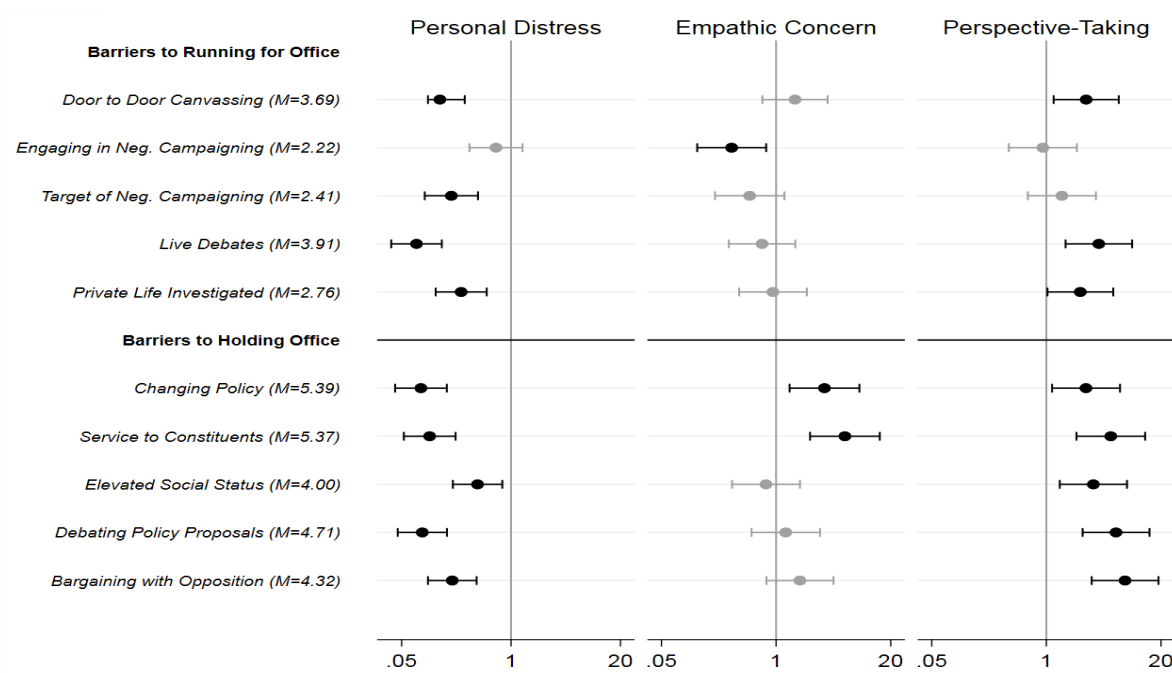
¹¹ We do not control for contextual factors (e.g. local opportunity structure), as these types of considerations do not factor into the formation of ambition (Lawless 2012).

¹² See Appendix C for the full results.

We begin with personal distress. We expect people high in personal distress to dislike most aspects of running for office. Looking at the first panel of Figure 1, personal distress significantly predicts four out of five aspects of campaigning ($ps < .001$). The only exception to this pattern is that personal distress does not significantly predict *engaging* in negative campaigning ($p = .19$). Thus, personal distress seems to be a major motivator of election aversion. In addition to predicting a dislike of the election process, personal distress also predicts disliking all five aspects of holding office ($ps < .01$). Overall, people high in personal distress dislike virtually every aspect of running for and holding office, suggesting that a lack of emotional contagion is a key part of the political personality that Lasswell (1948) identified.

We focus next on empathic concern, shown in the second panel of Figure 1. Our expectations here were more complex. Empathic concern should predict more positive feelings towards policymaking and advocating on behalf of others, but more negative feelings towards engaging in potentially harmful behaviors. Consistent with these expectations, people high in empathic concern have more positive views of changing policy and helping constituents with their problems ($ps < .01$). However, empathic concern does not predict attitudes towards aspects of office that are less directly prosocial, such as increased social status, or debating or bargaining over policy. Also consistent with our expectations, people high in empathic concern are more averse to engaging in negative campaigning ($p < .05$). But opposite to personal distress, empathic concern does not significantly affect feelings towards being the *target* of negative campaigning, having one's private life investigated, or other aspects of campaigning. Overall, these results suggest that people high in empathic concern find political office more appealing, but may be less willing to engage in some tactics used to get there.

Figure 1: Empathy and Attitudes toward Running for and Holding Office



Note: Plots show the odds ratios and their 95% confidence intervals on a log scale. Full results can be found in Appendix C.

Turning to perspective-taking, we expected that people high in this disposition should be more likely to enjoy strategic aspects of politics, such as debate and bargaining. Supporting these expectations, perspective-taking predicts significantly more favorable attitudes towards debating policy proposals, bargaining with the opposition, and helping constituents with problems ($p < .001$). Perspective-taking also predicts more positive attitudes towards policymaking ($p < .05$). People high in perspective-taking also find the prospects of improved social status more appealing ($p < .01$), though it is unclear why. Thus, it seems that high perspective-takers particularly enjoy the *process* of making policy.

We find a similar pattern of results when looking at aspects of running for office. High perspective-takers have more favorable attitudes towards meeting with constituents and engaging in debates ($p < .05$). They also feel less negatively towards having their private lives investigated ($p <$

.05), though this finding is no longer statistically significant after correcting for multiple comparisons ($p = .053$). Perspective-taking does not, however, significantly predict attitudes towards either engaging in or being targeted by negative campaigning. Overall, people high in perspective-taking seem to be less election averse and more likely to enjoy the policymaking process.

In sum, our results suggest that each aspect of empathy plays an important role in ambition. Personal distress predicts aversion to virtually every aspect of running for and holding office. Perspective-taking predicts greater enjoyment of debate and the policy process, while empathic concern predicts favorable views towards influencing policy outcomes, but unfavorable views on the use of negative campaigning.

Connecting Empathy to Ambition

Our results show that empathy is related to feelings towards specific aspects of running for and holding political office, but leave open the question of how these feelings (and thus empathy) translate into the more general concept of political ambition. According to our theory, feelings about aspects of running for and holding office directly influence ambition, providing the mechanism through which empathy shapes ambition. This is a standard mediation account of the effect of empathy on ambition, which is properly tested within the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework (Preacher and Hayes 2008).¹³ SEMs allow us to simultaneously estimate 1) empathy's effects on feelings about office holding and seeking, 2) the effects of these feelings on political ambition, 3) the direct effect of empathy on ambition, and 4) the indirect effects of empathy on ambition *through* feelings about office holding and seeking. As with virtually all personality research, our reliance on observational data means we cannot make causal claims from these data, a limitation

¹³ We leverage structural equation models (SEMs) rather than recent modeling approaches (Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2011) because SEM integrates latent variable estimation and allows for the estimation of residual covariance across our latent measures of interest.

that is especially applicable to mediation analyses (e.g., Bullock, Green, and Ha 2010). Nonetheless, our SEM model allows us to test whether the data is consistent with our causal hypotheses.

We begin by modeling each latent dimension of empathy as a function of the seven corresponding IRI questions. For our mediating variables, we reduce the ten questions analyzed in Figure 1 down to three latent factors: (1) *Policymaking* (changing policy, helping constituents, debating policy, bargaining, and social status); (2) *Public Debate* (going door-to-door, live debates, and debating policy); and (3) *Negative Campaigning* (engaging in and being the target of negative campaigning, and having their private lives investigated).¹⁴ For our dependent variable, we treat the seven questions about the likelihood of running for office as indicators of a single latent factor of *Political Ambition*.¹⁵

We present both the indirect effects and total effects of empathy on ambition in graphical form, and provide the full details of our SEM estimation in Appendix D.¹⁶ Figure 2 displays the effects of empathy on feelings towards each component of political ambition, and in turn, the effects of these components on ambition itself. Each line in the figure represents a relationship estimated in our model. These estimates come from the full structural equation model (see Appendix D), but we omit from presentation all estimated effects that are not part of the indirect effects (e.g., direct effects) for

¹⁴ See Appendix C for the latent factor structure. When constituency service is treated as a fourth factor, it is a significant predictor of ambition, while policymaking is not. However, the two variables are highly correlated (see Appendix I).

¹⁵ We find very similar effects when analyzing each level of office separately (see Appendix H).

¹⁶ Indirect effects refer to the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable that occur *through some mediating variable*. Direct effects refer to the remaining effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable *that is not accounted for by the mediating variables*. Total effects refer to the sum of indirect effects and direct effects.

clarity. To walk through an example of the results reported in the figure, perspective-taking is positively and significantly associated with feelings about public debate, and positive feelings about public debate are significantly and positively associated with respondents' political ambition. Importantly for our theory, both feelings about public debate and feelings about negative campaigning are strongly associated with latent political ambition. When respondents are more comfortable with the public nature of political campaigns and the negativity often associated with those campaigns, they report higher levels of latent ambition. In contrast, respondents' feelings about the opportunity to make policy does not have a significant effect on latent ambition after accounting for feelings about debate and negativity.¹⁷ Thus, the pathways that might allow empathy to affect latent ambition flow through respondents' feelings about negativity and public discourse.

With these effects of our latent factors on ambition estimated, we can also examine how these factors mediate the relationship between empathy and ambition itself. The mediated, or indirect, effects are calculated from SEMs by multiplying the first-stage regression coefficient by the second stage regression coefficient. We calculate the indirect effects of empathy through each latent factor and display those effects in Figure 3 below. Starting with personal distress, this aspect of empathy significantly decreases ambition through feelings about both negativity and debate, with the pathway through debate having the largest effect. Next, perspective-taking has positive indirect effects for all components of ambition, but only the pathway through debate is statistically significant. Finally, the indirect effects of empathic concern on ambition are both positive and negative, though none of these effects are statistically significant. Taken together, these results provide some insight into *how* empathy affects ambition, suggesting that feelings towards public debate and other forms of interaction play an important role in the formation of ambition.

¹⁷ Though somewhat surprising, this finding is consistent with work showing that issue passions do not significantly affect ambition (Fox and Lawless 2005).

Figure 2: Path Coefficients for the SEM of Political Ambition.

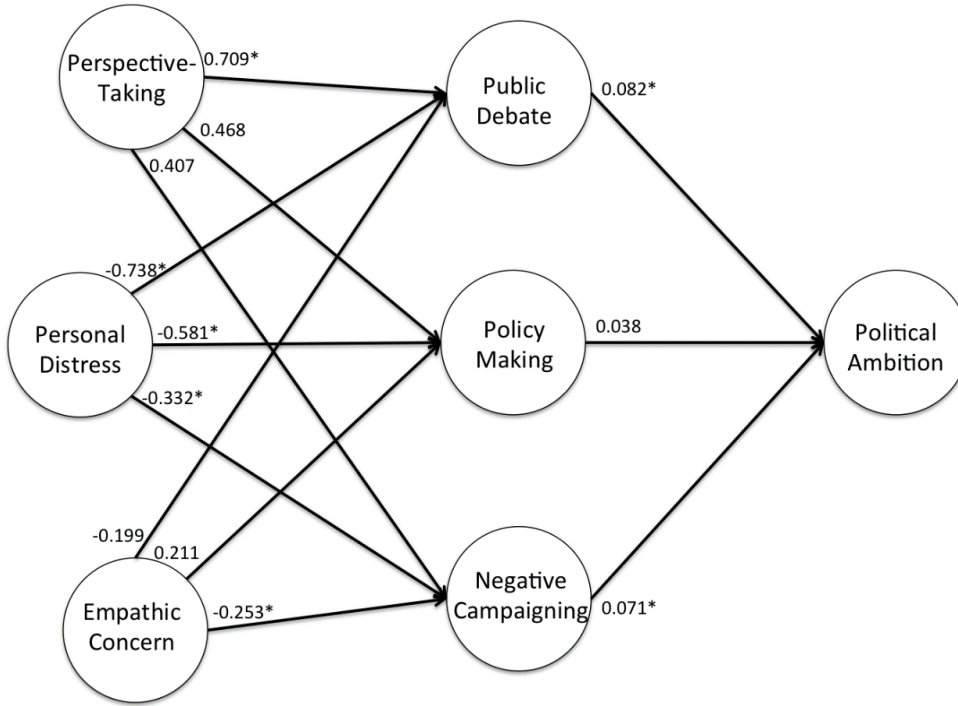
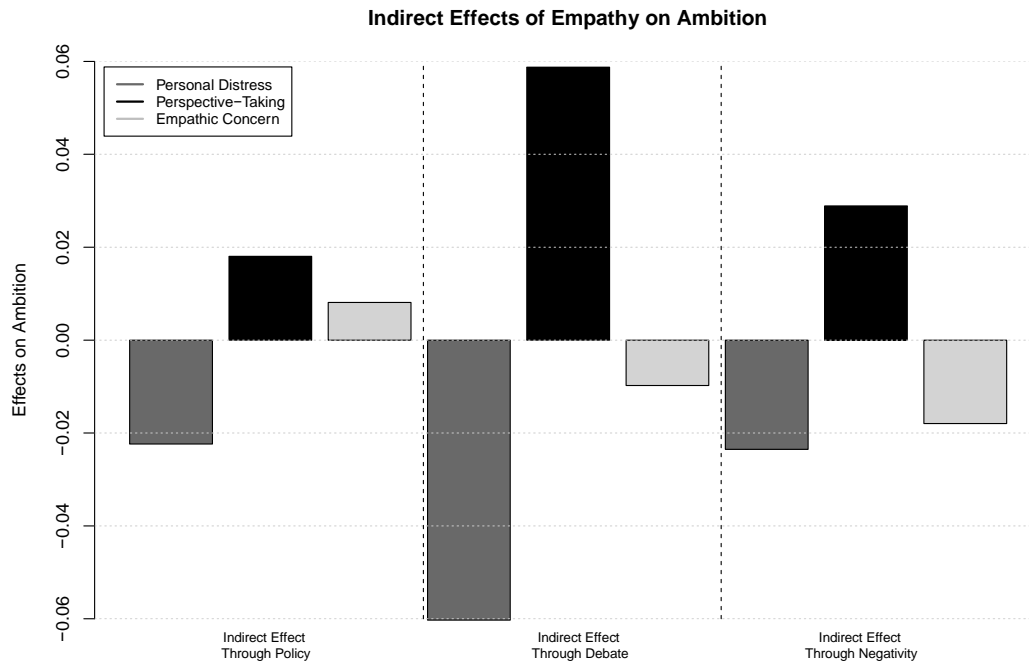


Figure 3: The Indirect Effects of Empathy on Ambition Through Each Latent Factor



The indirect effects speak to how empathy affects ambition, but do not give a sense of the magnitude of the total effects (indirect plus direct) of the dimensions of empathy on ambition. To do so, we examine the total change in predicted ambition from our model as we move from the minimum to the maximum on each dimension of empathy. Rather than holding the remainder of the covariates constant, we instead report the difference in predicted ambition for respondents with the maximum vs. the minimum level of each aspect of empathy. Such an approach more carefully recognizes the collinearity present across covariates in our model (Hanmer and Kolkman 2013).

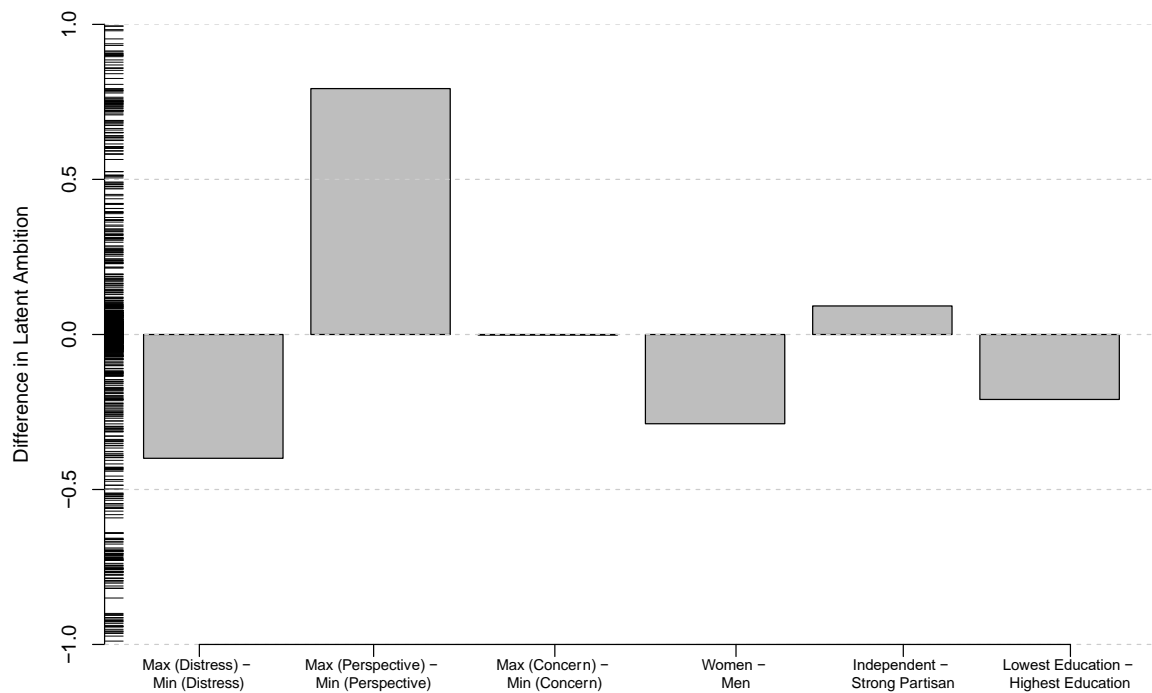
These differences in predicted ambition are reported in Figure 4. For scale, we also randomly select 1,000 pairs of respondents in our sample and calculate the difference in their predicted latent political ambition. This allows us to examine the differences in predicted ambition we might expect at random within our sample. We also use this same method to report the average difference in the predicted ambition between men and women, independents and strong partisans, and between those with the most and least education in our sample, as education, partisanship, and gender have been noted to play pivotal roles in the development of political ambition (e.g. Fox and Lawless 2005).¹⁸

This prediction exercise suggests that the effects of personal distress and perspective-taking are particularly noteworthy, while the positive and negative effects of empathic concern largely cancel each other out. The change in predicted ambition (including both indirect and direct effects) that results from a move from the minimum to the maximum in personal distress is associated with a decrease of 35% of a standard deviation in latent ambition, while the same move on perspective-taking is associated with 70% of a standard deviation increase in latent ambition. For the sake of comparison, women are 25% of a standard deviation lower in ambition than men, strong partisans score 8% of a standard deviation higher than independents, and the least educated in our sample are

¹⁸ More traditional estimates of direct effects are reported in Appendix D.

18% of a standard deviation less ambitious than the most educated.¹⁹ While we would be hesitant to say this exercise suggests empathy is more important in explaining ambition than these other covariates, this does indicate that the effects of empathy are substantively comparable to covariates that prior research has identified as playing a key role in ambition formation.

Figure 4: Total Differences in Latent Ambition across Key Independent Variables



Note: Figure reports differences in predicted ambition for respondents at the minimum and maximum reported levels of each covariate. The y-axis rug reports a distribution of differences in predicted ambition between 1000 randomly selected pairs of respondents.

Robustness Checks on the Effect of Empathy

¹⁹ The total effects of empathic concern are <1% of a standard deviation of predicted ambition.

The evidence above suggests that empathy has important consequences for political ambition, but several questions about the robustness of these results remain. We address these issues briefly here and in more detail in the Appendix. The first concern is that our measures of empathy are actually capturing other dimensions of personality. In anticipation of this concern, we included measures of the Big Five personality traits in the YouGov survey. Our SEM results are substantively unchanged after controlling for the Big Five traits (full results shown in Appendix F).

A second concern is that the effects of empathy may be limited to only certain political or demographic groups. For example, empathic concern might increase ambition among Democrats, but not Republicans, due to the association between the Democratic party and empathy (Hayes 2005). Alternatively, empathy may have different effects among women due to gender roles or differential scrutiny in the campaign process (e.g., Schneider et al. 2015). We investigated both of these forms of heterogeneity and found no support for any of these interactions. Taken together, the results in this section suggest that the effects of empathy are substantively large, are not due to shared variance with common personality traits, and are not relegated to particular groups.

Is There an Empathic Deficit among Those Who Run for or Hold Office?

So far we have shown that dispositional empathy shapes the public's prospective interest in running for political office. But are those who have actually taken steps to run for office different from the rest of the mass public? We address this question in two ways. First, we examine whether respondents in our main sample have taken steps towards running. All respondents who had not run for office were asked whether they have ever considered it. If they responded affirmatively ($n = 116$), they were asked which of five steps they have taken towards actually running, such as investigating how to place their name on the ballot, or searching out possible campaign donors. For our first test, we created a variable that is the count of the number of affirmative answers given to

these six questions. For our second, we include our oversample and analyze whether respondents have previously run for ($n = 331$) or held ($n = 189$) political office.

We model each of the three outcome variables (*Considered*, *Ran*, and *Held*) as a function of the three dimensions of empathy and the same set of covariates described above.²⁰ The first column of Table 4 shows the results of a negative binomial regression predicting the considered running count variable (excluding the oversample). Consistent with our findings above, perspective-taking predicts having taken further steps towards running for office, while personal distress predicts taking fewer steps. Empathic concern, however, is not a significant predictor. The second and third columns show the results for our *Ran* and *Held* outcomes, while including the oversample. In both models, personal distress significantly predicts a lower likelihood of running for or holding office, though we cannot reject the null for perspective-taking or empathic concern. Overall, the results are largely consistent with our previous findings, in spite of using retrospective, rather than prospective reports.

Table 2: Models of Running for and Winning Office

Variable Name	Steps To Running	Ran for Office	Held Office
Empathic Concern	0.42 (0.95)	0.30 (0.61)	0.50 (0.69)
Perspective-Taking	2.62* (0.85)	-0.67 (0.57)	-0.13 (0.63)
Personal Distress	-2.17* (0.69)	-1.73* (0.50)	-1.33* (0.58)
Fantasy	-0.28 (0.72)	0.39 (0.47)	0.13 (0.53)
Partisan Strength	-0.16 (0.12)	0.14 (0.08)	0.21* (0.09)
Education	0.37* (0.10)	0.39* (0.06)	0.38* (0.07)
Income: 2nd Quartile	-0.59 (0.37)	0.03 (0.28)	-0.08 (0.35)

²⁰ Results are substantively unchanged when controlling for the Big Five (see Appendix F).

Income: 3rd Quartile	-0.22 (0.44)	0.11 (0.32)	0.30 (0.37)
Income: 4th Quartile	0.12 (0.44)	0.03 (0.32)	-0.10 (0.38)
Income: Missing	-0.37 (0.43)	0.33 (0.33)	0.57 (0.38)
Male	1.30* (0.26)	0.89* (0.18)	0.54* (0.21)
Hispanic	-0.59 (0.53)	-1.09 (0.62)	-0.72 (0.75)
Black	-1.40* (0.55)	-1.72* (0.51)	-0.74 (0.50)
Other Racial ID	-0.36* (0.51)	0.01 (0.36)	-0.20 (0.44)
Age	-0.02 (0.01)	0.08* (0.01)	0.06* (0.01)
Married	-0.35 (0.28)	0.21 (0.19)	0.33 (0.22)
Employed Full-Time	-0.16 (0.27)	0.05 (0.20)	0.14 (0.23)
Constant	-3.06* (0.93)	-7.35* (0.76)	-7.62* (0.88)
N	829	1,128	1,128

Note: Cell entries report results from a negative binomial regression (column 1) and logistic regressions (columns 2 and 3). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$

Can Empathic People be Encouraged to Run?

We now have evidence that empathy predicts political ambition, and that feelings towards campaigning help drive these relationships. However, the relationship between empathy and ambition might not be set in stone. The salience of each aspect, like negative campaigning, should vary across institutions and across time. In addition, it is possible that altering the nature of elections and campaigns could influence the type of person who runs for office. For example, there is some evidence that public funding for elections can encourage more women to enter the candidate pool (Werner and Mayer 2007). As a result, we expect that highlighting certain aspects of campaigning might change the way that empathy relates to political ambition. In this section, we offer an experimental test of this proposition.

To do this, we embedded an experiment into a survey of 1,789 undergraduates from the University of Houston.²¹ While actual opportunities to run for office typically do not present themselves until later in life, a student sample allows exploration of ambition since the desire to run can be traced back to one's formative years (see Lawless and Fox 2015). Moreover, our particular student sample is highly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, religious identity, and socioeconomic status (see Appendix E). And perhaps most importantly, we still obtain sufficient variation on our key measures of dispositional empathy.

At the beginning of the survey we randomly assigned subjects to read one of three versions of a short article about a local election.²² As a cover story, we told subjects we were interested in their opinions on modern campaign strategies, and all three conditions included discussion of mass mailers.²³ We varied the tone of the mailers and the overall campaign to range from what we expected to be the least to the most attractive given various levels of dispositional empathy. The *Negativity Condition* emphasized negative campaigning, with mentions of “mud-slinging and name-calling” and the two candidates “tearing each other down.” The *Neutral Condition* emphasized the use of mailers with no explicit mention of tone. The *Dialogue Condition* was intended to be the most positive of the treatments, emphasizing the candidates’ belief in “conveying their visions” and “open political dialogue” (see Appendix E for the full text). Notably, we do not intend for *Negativity* and *Dialogue* conditions to be opposites, but to represent two different campaign environments that we expect to be appealing to different personalities. After exposure to the article, subjects were asked to

²¹ A total of 2,006 respondents completed the IRI scale. We exclude from analysis 217 respondents (11%) who failed any of two attention checks embedded in the IRI scale.

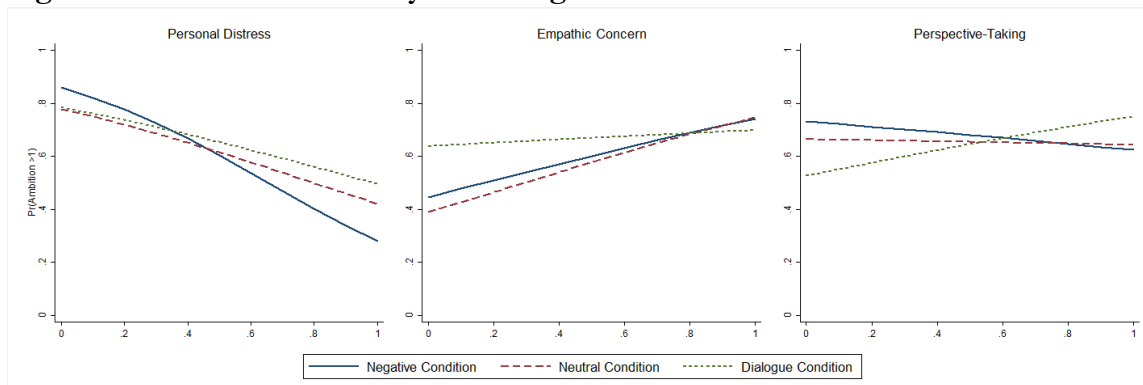
²² See Appendix E for evidence that our randomization was effective.

²³ Following the experimental conditions, all subjects were asked two questions about their perceptions of mass mailers in order to distract from the true purpose of the manipulation.

imagine that they were approached by a local community leader and asked to run for city council.²⁴ Subjects then reported their interest in and likelihood of running for city council. We average these two items to form a scale of *Ambition* ($\alpha = .88$), which takes on nine values.²⁵

We use ordinal logistic regression to predict ambition as a function of dispositional empathy, the tone of the treatment, and the interactions between each dimension of empathy and the tone.²⁶ The results of this model, which includes demographic controls,²⁷ are in Appendix E. Figure 5 plots the predicted probabilities of having at least some interest in or likelihood of running for office (i.e. the cumulative probability of expressing a level of ambition that is greater than 1, the lowest possible value).

Figure 5: Predicted Probability of Having at Least Minimal Ambition



Note: Plots show the predicted probability of having any level of ambition greater than the lowest (1). Calculated from the model in Appendix E. Probabilities estimated holding all other covariates at their mean or modal values.

²⁴ We chose city council because it would sound more realistic to undergraduates, we would have greater ability to manipulate perceptions of the campaigns, and the office serves as an important stepping stone for higher office (Van Dunk 1997).

²⁵ Analyzing each separately yields substantively similar results.

²⁶ Mean levels of ambition in each experimental condition are shown in Appendix E.

²⁷ We control for partisan strength, socioeconomic status, gender, race, and age.

Across all three conditions, personal distress (the leftmost panel of Figure 5) significantly depresses ambition. Yet, the magnitude of the predicted change varies by experimental condition. The predicted influence of personal distress is significantly greater (more negative) in the negativity condition than in the dialogue condition ($p < .05$). At the highest levels of personal distress, being in the dialogue condition vs. the negativity condition significantly increases the probability of having at least some interest in running for office by 22 percentage points. This result is consistent with our finding above that people high in personal distress strongly dislike negativity in campaigning. However, it also shows that when, as in the dialogue condition, negativity is explicitly left out of the campaign process, individuals high in personal distress are more likely to be drawn to political office.

Turning to the middle panel of Figure 5, empathic concern is positively related to ambition in the neutral condition.²⁸ The negativity condition does little to alter the effect of empathic concern, which may be because empathic concern does not predict feelings towards others' negativity. In the dialogue condition, respondents low in empathic concern had slightly higher levels of ambition, though the interaction term was not statistically significant. In short, these treatments had little impact on our prediction about empathic concern. Based on our previous findings, it seems likely that direct appeals to prosocial and policy concerns, rather than the tone of campaigns, would be more effective at appealing to those high in empathic concern.

Lastly, whereas perspective-taking (the rightmost panel of Figure 5) does not significantly predict ambition in either the neutral or negativity conditions, it is positive and statistically

²⁸ Unlike the result here, empathic concern did not significantly predict ambition in our national sample. However, our primary interest is whether the treatments moderate empathy in ways that are consistent with our theory. Differences between the national sample and our neutral condition may be driven by differences in sample and the focus solely on city council.

significant ($p < .05$) in the dialogue condition. At the highest level of perspective-taking, being in the dialogue condition, rather than the negativity condition, significantly increases the probability of having some interest in running for office by 13 percentage points. This result is consistent with our finding that people high in perspective-taking tend to enjoy public debate and dialogue. Interestingly, the dialogue condition seems to depress ambition among people at low levels of perspective-taking, consistent with the notion that these people have lower interest in others' points of view. Thus, if campaigns were to offer more opportunities for debate and dialogue, they might be even more appealing to those high in perspective-taking.

Overall, our experimental results demonstrate the causal effects of the perceived campaign environment on political ambition, and how the campaign environment interacts with individuals' empathic dispositions. The positive, significant interactions between the dialogue treatment and both personal distress and perspective-taking suggest that changes to the electoral environment may lead to changes in the type of political personality that is drawn into public office.

Conclusion

The role of empathy in American civic life is as important as ever. Perspective-taking facilitates the understanding of others' viewpoints and increases the likelihood of reaching a (Trötschel et al. 2011). Empathic concern motivates people to act on the behalf of others (Wilhelm and Bekkers 2010). In an era of polarization and low levels of trust in government, it seems critical for representatives to possess these traits. Yet, evidence suggests it may be in short supply. State legislators systematically misperceive the opinions of their constituents (Broockman and Skovron 2014). Elected officials also frequently discount the attitudes of constituents who disagree with them (Butler and Dynes 2015) and this lack of convergence with public opinion extends to both high and low salience issues (Fowler and Hall 2016).

Our research to some extent assuages these concerns and presents a more complex relationship between empathy and political ambition. We find evidence that perspective-taking, a disposition linked to many of the positive outcomes of empathy, actually facilitates political ambition. Empathic concern, on the other hand, makes some aspects of politics more appealing and others less so, leading to a null total effect on ambition. Personal distress, however, consistently predicted much lower levels of ambition. Fortunately, personal distress is not clearly linked to normatively desirable attitudes and behaviors. And, given that personal distress is associated with flight from a stressor, rather than an attempt to relieve the source of stress, lower levels of ambition among those high in personal distress may be desirable. Overall, it seems that empathy does play an important role in defining the “political person,” and that the politically ambitious are fairly well suited to the demands of political office.

While these results perhaps support cautious optimism about the dispositions of politicians, our experimental findings suggest that changes to the political environment could encourage more empathic individuals to run. To the degree that broader trends in American politics like polarization encourage increased negativity in elections, those trends are likely systematically influencing the level of political ambition amongst those low and high in dispositional empathy. Further, while efforts to regulate campaign rhetoric like code of conduct laws in judicial elections have largely failed on First Amendment grounds, our research suggests that such efforts had the potential to encourage different types of citizens to consider political candidacy as a viable option for themselves. More specifically, both our observational and experimental evidence suggests efforts to increase the quantity and civility of actual political debates occurring during campaigns may encourage those high in perspective taking to develop greater political ambition. Our findings also suggest that in other countries, where shorter election cycles and more party-centric campaigns may reduce the potential for having to engage in personal attacks on the opponent, there may be higher overall levels of

empathic concern in the candidate pool. Extending our work to examine how empathy is related to candidate emergence in these types of electoral systems would offer additional insight into the potential effects of any changes to the current context.

By analyzing the public's feelings towards different aspects of running for and holding office, our research also provides new insights into who is election averse and why. Election aversion itself seems to consist of distinct factors that include the prospect of engaging in negative campaigning, being targeted by negative campaigning, and the publicity involved in the process. As we show, these factors do not elicit the same responses from all individuals and they do not necessarily impact ambition in the same way. Future work should continue to probe this heterogeneity, but overall, our results suggest that election aversion and particularly the prospect of having to engage in negative campaigning may be deterring individuals high in both personal distress and empathic concern from running for office.

Yet, election aversion is not the whole story. Some of our respondents appear to be “office averse” as well. That is, the stress and publicity of holding office that can also depress political ambition. On the other hand, some of our respondents found aspects of holding office relatively appealing. The question then becomes one of the relative push and pull of all of these various components of political life. For whom does the desire to engage in debate outweigh the desire to avoid negative campaigning? Our findings show that incorporating individuals' empathic dispositions provide valuable insight, though attitudes towards these aspects of running for and holding office are likely affected by a variety of other factors.

Of course, as with nearly all personality research, our conclusions are limited by the largely observational nature of our research. For this reason, we cannot rule out the possibility that some alternative trait is not responsible for the effects we found here. For example, anxiety and personal distress are likely related, but we were unable to directly examine the effects of anxiety. However,

our results are quite robust to controls for the Big Five personality traits, suggesting that these three dimensions of empathy help explain unique variance in political ambition.

As the first study of empathy and political ambition, it raises many further questions. First, our oversample largely consisted of people who have run for or held lower level offices, such as city council or local school board. While these offices represent the bulk of elected offices in the U.S., we are unable to speak to how these dynamics play out in higher offices. For example, the selection pressures might be even more dramatic at higher levels of office and thus we might find much larger differences between politicians and the mass public. Second, we do not know how or whether tenure in office affects empathy. Research on medical professionals finds that empathy declines throughout medical school, particularly when students begin clinical practice (e.g., Neumann et al. 2011; Hojat et al. 2009). Some of this decline may be attributed to cynicism and a loss of idealism among medical students (Neumann et al. 2011), which may have a parallel process in politics. Third, the research finding positive effects of empathy has been conducted largely outside of the political domain (though see Ten Brinke et al. 2015). There is reason to expect that findings from research on business negotiations translate into the political domain, but there are also key differences between the corporate and political arenas that could lead to different effects. Fourth, we did not explore how the various dimensions of empathy operate in combination with one another. Preliminary analyses of our YouGov sample offer suggestive evidence of interactive effects, but further investigation of how ambition varies across different overall empathic “types” will better address questions of whether one dimension can overwhelm the others in the candidate emergence process. Overall, while our research demonstrates the importance of empathy for understanding who is most likely to run for office and why, it also opens a number of new questions and highlights how further study of empathy will have important implications for the way the public is represented.

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