

**Do Elections Keep the Compassionate out of the Candidate Pool?**

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**Abstract:** Political candidates must not only possess a desire for a position in government, but also a tolerance for the electoral process typically required to attain it. Recent works suggest that this latter requirement may keep certain types of people out of the potential candidate pool. We contend that individuals high in empathic concern are one such type. While compassion for others may make certain aspects of public service attractive, it should also make some of the more negative features of political campaigns repellant. We find support for this theory among two national samples. Those higher in empathic concern were more likely to express nascent ambition when considering a political position that was appointed rather than elected. This work further illustrates how exploring the interaction of psychological dispositions and political institutions can contribute to our understanding of the behavior of politicians and the quality of representation.

Personality traits are a powerful force in mass behavior (Mondak 2010; e.g., Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017), but only recently have scholars begun recognizing their role in explaining elite behavior. For example, personality traits help explain state legislators' activity and productivity (Dietrich et al. 2012), and senators who display desirable traits such as empathy are more influential (ten Brinke et al. 2015). More generally, people who engage in immoral behavior in their personal lives, as indicated by marital infidelity, are more likely to engage in professional misconduct in such roles as police officers, financial advisors, and CEOs (Griffin, Kruger, and Maturana 2019). Thus, while explanations of elite behavior have long focused on institutions, there is growing evidence that elites' personality traits also help explain their behavior.

Of course, politicians, and those who are interested in political office, are not randomly selected from the population. Rather, political office is appealing to people with certain personality traits, which alters the characteristics of the pool of available candidates. While many of these traits are associated with positive outcomes, others suggest that unethical and exploitative behavior may also be more likely among those attracted to running for office. The politically ambitious are more inclined toward achieving their own goals at the expense of others (i.e., Machiavellianism), and self-absorbed behavior that displays a lack of empathy and a preoccupation with others' admiration (i.e., narcissism; Blais and Pruyers 2017; Peterson and Palmer 2019; Pruyers and Blais 2019). As such, the type of people who are most likely to be attracted to political office may also be the least likely to prioritize the needs of those they are supposed to represent.

Frequent elections are intended to give constituents the ability to check these more unscrupulous dispositions by replacing poor representatives. However, those possessing more desirable traits may not enter the pool of potential challengers, as the electoral process may deter candidates who are opposed to the dishonesty and conflict that competition may introduce (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece and Stoddard 2015). Building on these works, we argue that one

such group of people – those high in empathic concern – are disproportionately deterred by elections. Empathic concern —the tendency to feel compassion or sympathy in response to another’s suffering (Davis 1983) –consistently predicts prosocial behavior (e.g., Wilhelm and Bekkers 2010) and seems to be a trait that is desirable among politicians. But, this trait also makes certain aspects of electoral competition particularly unattractive. We find support for this hypothesis in two nationally representative samples, one of which includes an oversample of citizens who have previously run for office. Our findings further highlight the importance of understanding how the design of political processes and institutions influence the type of people who are interested in holding office.

### **Nascent Ambition among the Empathic**

Dispositional empathy is often described in terms of three main dimensions: empathic concern, perspective-taking, and personal distress. Empathic concern and personal distress are both emotional responses to another’s plight, but empathic concern involves feeling *for* the person, while distress involves feeling *as* another person. Subsequently, empathic concern motivates altruism, while personal distress triggers avoidance (Batson et al. 1983). Perspective-taking, on the other hand, involves a cognitive, rather than an emotional response. Previous work found that while perspective-taking predicts higher ambition and personal distress predicts lower ambition, there was no relationship between empathic concern and ambition (Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas 2019).

The null relationship between empathic concern and ambition suggests that those who are most likely to feel compassion for others may hold conflicted feelings about running for office. On one hand, people high in empathic concern should be attracted to the opportunity to serve others in office. On the other hand, the competition and negativity endemic to political campaigns may be a deterrent to these same people and perhaps lead them to seek alternative paths to service. Indeed, Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas (2019) find that individuals high in empathic concern viewed the

opportunities to change policy and serve constituents favorably, but were more opposed to the possibility of having to engage in negative campaigning.

These findings suggest that people high in empathic concern are election-averse. That is, the electoral process, rather than the tasks of the job itself, dissuades these types of people from seeking political office (Kanthak and Woon 2015). However, there is also evidence that many people also find the idea of *holding* political office aversive (Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas 2019). For example, emphasizing different aspects of the job significantly alters how enjoyable people perceive a political career to be (Schneider et al. 2016). In sum, further testing is needed to clarify whether (1) it is in fact the electoral process itself that is responsible for depressing the political ambition of empathic people; and (2) whether these people could be encouraged to hold office if that process were modified or removed.

## **Data and Results**

We present two studies conducted on national samples of the mass public. Though analyses of targeted samples offer invaluable insights (e.g. Maestas et al. 2006; Lawless 2011), we choose to follow the subset of works using broader adult samples (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016; Dynes, Hassell, and Miles 2019), as this approach is more appropriate for the question at hand. An initial attraction to running for office – or nascent ambition (Fox and Lawless 2005) – is a necessary precursor to taking any steps toward entering the political arena. To accurately estimate the extent to which the electoral process depresses this initial interest, we need to sample from the population of eligible individuals.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, our interest in empathy

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<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true when examining empathy. Those who pursue careers that are most likely to lead to political office (e.g. law) score lower on dispositional empathy than peers in other fields (e.g. medicine; Courtright, Mackey, and Packard 2005; Wilson, Prescott, and Becket 2012; Kołodziej

stems from the more general question of whether people who are attracted to running for office are unique. To test whether this “political type” (Lasswell 1948) exists, we need to compare those who are ambitious to everyone who is not.

The first study was embedded in a survey fielded by YouGov from May 6-18, 2016, while the second study was embedded in the pre-election wave of the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES, also fielded by YouGov), which was fielded from September 27 to November 5, 2018. Both included 1,000 respondents matched to the general population. The first study also featured an oversample of 300 people who have run for political office. In all analyses below, we pool the two studies for statistical power, but present separate results in the Supplementary Material. All analyses use statistical weights provided by YouGov, except for those noted in the text below.

Both studies include the same two dependent variables. The first is a standard measure of nascent ambition and asks respondents to imagine they were approached by a political organizer about running for office, then to report how likely they would be to run. In Study 1, this question focused on running for school board. In Study 2, this question was randomized between school board and city council. The second question in each study informs respondents that members of the school board (or city council) are sometimes appointed, then asks them to report how likely they would be to accept an appointed position.<sup>3</sup> By analyzing the difference in responses to these two

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2016). Thus, only sampling from those most likely to run would limit our ability to assess the role that empathy plays in these early stages.

<sup>3</sup> These offices are the most likely to be an individual’s first political offices and thus are the most realistic and appropriate for general population samples.

questions, we can estimate how much citizens are deterred by the election process, and who is more likely to be deterred.<sup>4</sup>

Following much previous work, we use the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI) to measure multiple dimensions of dispositional empathy (Davis 1983). We focus on the 21 questions that measure empathic concern, perspective-taking, and personal distress.<sup>5</sup> Question wording and details are available in the Appendix. Our primary independent variable is empathic concern, but we also include personal distress and perspective-taking as controls. The Supplementary Material contains more details about the sociodemographic correlates of empathy, but it is worth noting a few main findings. Education is positively related to empathic concern and perspective-taking, but negatively related to personal distress. Age is positively related to empathic concern and negatively related to personal distress. Finally, women tend to score higher on all aspects of empathy.

### *Results*

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<sup>4</sup> The electoral ambition question was asked prior to the appointment question in both surveys.

Ideally, we would have randomized the order of the questions, but it is unlikely that being asked the standard ambition question affected how respondents answered the appointment question (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The full IRI contains 28 questions and includes a fourth dimension, fantasy. Because existing work does not suggest a theoretical link between fantasy and political outcomes, we omitted the fantasy battery from Study 2. For consistency, we do not include it in our Study 1 analyses. However, including fantasy as an additional control does not alter our Study 1 findings.

As expected, nascent ambition in the general population is low (see Figure 1). In both studies, over half of respondents expressed no ambition at all.<sup>6</sup> And for many, removing elections does not change their level of ambition. The majority of respondents do not change their responses between questions, and approximately one-third of both samples continue to say that they are “not likely at all” to want a position even if it were appointed. Still, at least one-third of respondents in both samples expressed greater ambition when appointed.<sup>7</sup> This significant difference between measures indicates a noteworthy degree of election aversion.

### **INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

Next, we take a multivariate approach to analyzing the association between political ambition and election aversion. We use OLS to separately model each of the two ambition measures as a function of each dimension of empathy, partisan strength, education, income, gender, race and ethnicity, age, marital status, and employment status.<sup>8</sup> These controls represent many of the important interest, status, and stage-in-life factors shown to be significant determinants of nascent ambition (Fox and Lawless 2005). Key model results are shown in Table 1 and plotted in Figure 2.

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<sup>6</sup> In Study 1, 54.2% of respondents indicated that they were “not likely at all” to run for office. In Study 2, 53.7% of respondents chose this response.

<sup>7</sup> In Study 1, 37% of respondents continued to express no ambition, while 37% increased their ambition. In Study 2, 38% continued to express no ambition, while 35% increased their ambition.

<sup>8</sup> Ordered logit models yield substantively similar results. We report results from OLS, as it imposes weaker distributional assumptions on the data-generating process, does not require the frequently violated proportional odds assumptions, and is the more statistically efficient estimator. See Supplementary Material for details.



The left-hand panel of Figure 2 displays the results for the standard ambition outcome that asks about interest in an elected position. Consistent with previous findings, the coefficient for perspective-taking is significant and positive ( $b=.58, p=.006$ ), the coefficient for personal distress is significant and negative ( $b=-.40, p=.015$ ), but the coefficient for empathic concern is substantively small and not statistically significant ( $b=.07, p=.737$ ). The right-hand panel of Figure 2 shows the results for the appointment outcome. Now, empathic concern is a significant predictor of ambition ( $b=.58, p=.011$ ), indicating that a shift from the minimum to maximum level of empathic concern is associated with an increase in ambition of just over half a scale point. Personal distress still exerts a substantial negative effect on ambition ( $b=-.87, p<.001$ ), but the estimate for perspective-taking is now shy of our threshold for statistical significance ( $b=.40, p=.090$ ). So, while personal distress predicts lower ambition, regardless of whether an election is involved, empathic concern only emerges as a positive predictor when considering an appointed office. For comparison, we also plot the estimated coefficients for partisan strength and education. Both are positive, significant, and relatively stable across the two question types. Thus, adding dispositional empathy to the more standard set of predictors of nascent ambition offers greater insight into the types of individuals who may be repelled by the electoral process.

### **INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE**

To demonstrate that these effects differ across outcomes, we calculate a difference score by subtracting the standard ambition question from the appointment question. Positive scores indicate greater ambition under appointment, suggesting election aversion. We model this outcome using

OLS and the same set of variables as in the models described above. The results are displayed in Table 1.<sup>9</sup>

As expected, empathic concern predicts significantly greater ambition when appointed ( $p=.004$ ). In other words, when freed of the aversive aspects of elections, people high in empathic concern find political office more desirable. Shifting from the minimum value to the maximum value of empathic concern (while holding all else at the mean values) increases our estimate of election aversion from 0.08 to 0.58. That is, among the more empathic, removing the prospect of an election increases ambition about half of a point on a five-point scale. However, among the least empathic, the effect of switching from election to appointment is small and not distinguishable from zero. Thus, our results are consistent with the idea that the electoral process deters those inclined to be attracted to the more prosocial aspects of politics.

Notably, personal distress has a significant negative effect ( $b=-.47, p=.001$ ), indicating that people high in this disposition are less likely to see any benefits from being appointed to office. In other words, people high in personal distress are substantially *office averse*. While not our main focus, this result still supports our more general claim that the electoral context interacts with individual traits in important ways and further highlights the value of taking individuals' empathic dispositions into consideration.

#### **INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

To address potential worries that results among the general population may not translate to those who are more politically experienced (though see Kertzer, n.d.), we leverage our oversample of

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<sup>9</sup> The results are substantively identical if we instead use ordered logit or a repeated measures approach (see Supplementary Material).

those who have run for office, and respondents in Study 2 who report that they have run for office ( $n=361$ ). For these analyses, we do not use survey weights as we do not expect those who have run for office to be representative of the population. We reproduce the difference score model, while controlling for whether a respondent has previously run for office and interacting this variable with empathic concern. The interaction is not statistically significant ( $p=.967$ ), and the effect of empathic concern is quite similar among those who have not run for office ( $b=.47, p=.01$ ) and those who have ( $b=.48, p=.121$ ), though the latter estimate is less precise. This suggests that our findings of election aversion apply both to the general population, and to those who are more politically experienced and again supports the hypothesis that the electoral process depresses ambition among those higher in empathic concern.

## **Conclusion**

Recognizing that people might pursue political power for selfish ends, the framers of the Constitution designed electoral institutions to allow the public to check the ambitions of self-interested politicians by forcing them to consider constituent interests. While these institutions do incentivize responsiveness, our findings suggest that elections may also discourage potential candidates who are the most dispositionally interested in serving others. These results help explain prior findings of null relationships between empathic concern and ambition (Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas 2019), suggesting that those high in empathic concern hold conflicting attitudes about running for office and holding office that cancel each other out when faced with an election. Once electoral barriers are removed, empathic people become more attracted to political office. Our findings contribute to a growing body of literature on the connections between personality and ambition (Dynes, Hassell, and Miles 2019) and emphasize the importance of examining how institutions and psychology interact.

Of course, completely removing elections from the political process is unrealistic. But by revealing election aversion, we add to works (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas 2019) suggesting that more feasible reforms (e.g. increased fact-checking; pledges against negative campaigning) to the process can still stimulate nascent ambition in a manner similar to that observed here. Even just directing individuals' focus to the more attractive aspects of office-holding may help increase the appeal of political careers (Schneider et al. 2016).

Moreover, differences in the general political context may also shape the relationship between personality traits and ambition. Both of our studies were conducted in a highly polarized, partisan environment. In a less polarized context, the electoral process may be less aversive to those high in empathic concern. Replicating our studies in other countries that vary in levels of polarization may shed light on this question.

Yet, even if electoral barriers are lowered, our findings suggest that holding office is itself still aversive to many. Though many respondents expressed more interest in a position when it was appointed rather than elected, the majority reported no difference between the two. In particular, those high in personal distress were the least likely to see any benefits from forgoing an election. While this dimension of empathy is not our primary focus, these findings highlight the need for further investigation of office aversion as well. That is, our results suggest that the job itself is quite unappealing to many, and that changes to the electoral process will do little to make it more attractive to these people.

Lastly, the effects of changing the nature of the candidate pool may not be entirely positive. We focus on empathy because previous works suggest that having representatives who are high on this trait may lead to more normatively desirable outcomes (e.g. more ethical bargaining and decision-making, Cohen 2010; Pohling et al. 2016). However, empathic concern does not lead to

universally good outcomes (Bloom 2016). For example, empathic concern may fuel partisan affective polarization (Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland 2019). This suggests that the process of uncovering which traits and characteristics contribute to the ideal “political type” is complex. Future research should continue to explore how the various aspects of psychology interact with each other and with political institutions to shape both ambition and behavior in office.

## Appendix

### Question Wording

#### Empathy

*Derived by Davis (1983), the following questions are used to measure empathy in both studies. The Fantasy dimension was omitted from the CCEES module. The letters following each question denote the dimension of empathy to which the question corresponds:*

*PT= perspective-taking*

*EC= empathic concern*

*PD = personal distress*

*F = fantasy*

The following statements inquire about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each item, indicate how well it describes you by choosing the appropriate letter on the scale: A (does not describe me well), B, C, D, or E (describes me very well). Read each item carefully before responding. Answer as honestly as you can. Thank you.

1. I day dream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me (F)
2. I often have tender concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me (EC)
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the “other guy’s” point of view (PT)
4. Sometimes I don’t feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems (EC)
5. I really get involved with the feelings of characters in a novel (F)
6. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease (PD)
7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don’t often get completely caught up in it (F)
8. I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision (PT)
9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them (EC)
10. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation (PD)
11. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective. (PT)
12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me (F)
13. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm (PD)
14. Other people’s misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal (EC)
15. If I’m sure I’m right about something, I don’t waste much time listening to other people’s arguments (PT)
16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters (F)
17. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me (PD)
18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don’t feel very much pity for them (EC)
19. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies (PD)
20. I am often quite touched by things I see happen (EC)
21. I believe there are two sides to every question and try to look at both of them (PT)
22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person (EC)
23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character (F)
24. I tend to lose control during emergencies (PD)
25. When I’m upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in his shoes” for a while (PT)
26. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me (F)

27. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces (PD)
28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place (PT)
- A – Does not describe me well
  - B
  - C
  - D
  - E – Describes me very well

### Political Ambition

Now we'd like you to imagine that a local political organizer approached you about running for office. How likely would you be to consider running for each type of political office below? [*Randomize order of items.*]

1. School board [*CCEs only*]
2. City council
3. Mayor
4. State legislator
5. Governor
6. House of Representatives
7. Senate

Response Options:

- Not likely at all (1)
- Not too likely (2)
- Somewhat likely (3)
- Very likely (4)
- Extremely likely (5)

### Political Appointment

As you may know, [*local school board / city council*] members are sometimes appointed to their position, rather than having to run for election. If you were given the opportunity to be appointed as [*local school board / city council*] member, how likely would you be to accept it?

- Not likely at all
- Not too likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely
- Extremely likely

## Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at:

<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ADPWF1>

## Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article:

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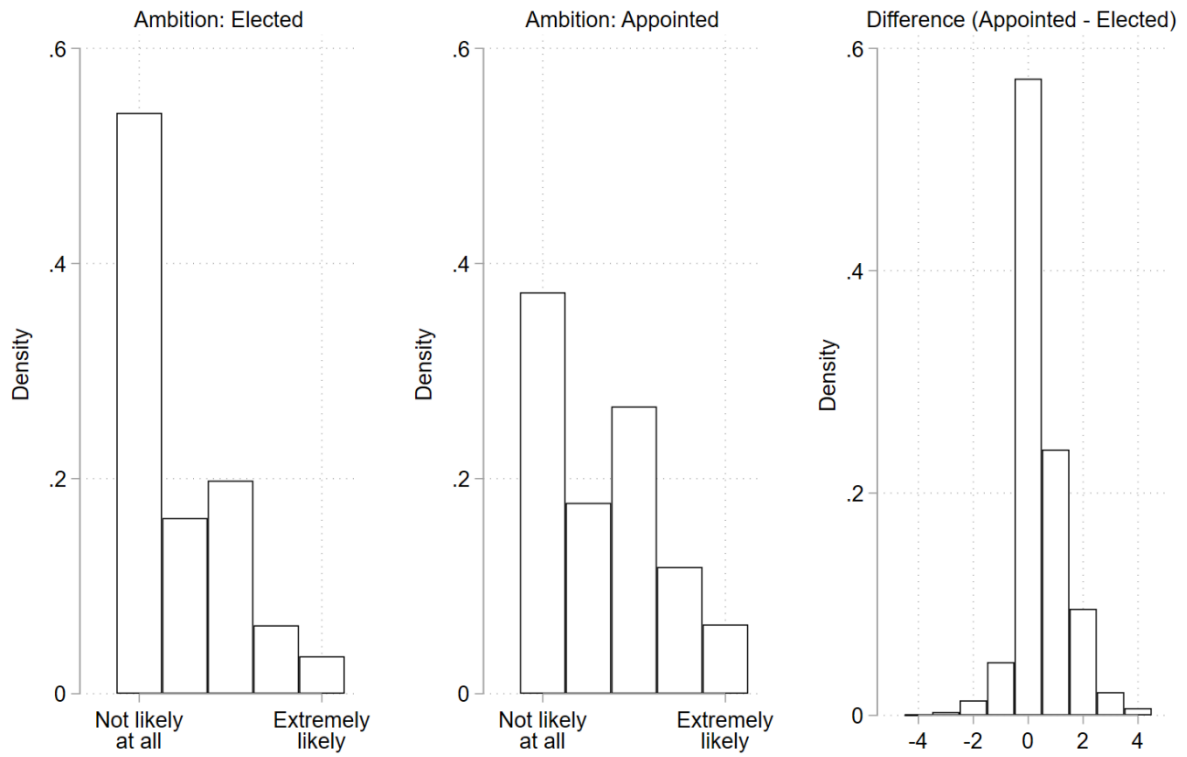
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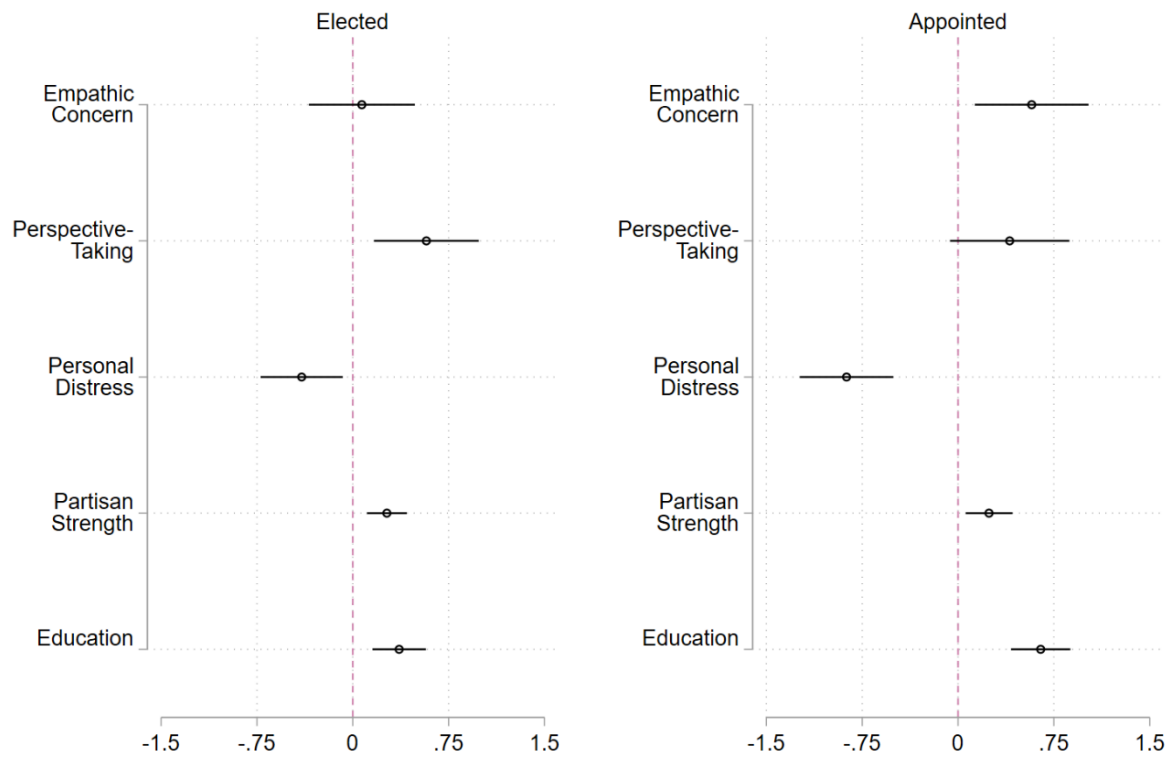
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**Figure 1. Distribution of Political Ambition.** Figure shows the distribution of political ambition for an elected office (left) and an appointed office (center). Right-hand panel displays the difference in responses (appointed minus elected).



**Figure 2. How Elections Alter the Effects of Empathy on Political Ambition.** Figure plots OLS coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from models predicting political ambition for an elected office (left panel) and an appointed office (right panel). Additional controls excluded from models. See Supplementary Material for details.

**Table 1: OLS Models of Ambition and Election Aversion**

	Ambition When Elected	Ambition When Appointed	Election Aversion (Appoint-Elect)	Election Aversion (Appoint-Elect)
<b>Empathic Concern</b>	.07 (.21) <i>p</i> = .737	.58 (.23) <i>p</i> = .011	.51 (.18) <i>p</i> = .004	.47 (.14) <i>p</i> = .001
<b>Perspective-Taking</b>	.58 (.21) <i>p</i> = .006	.40 (.24) <i>p</i> = .090	-.17 (.18) <i>p</i> = .327	-.09 (.14) <i>p</i> = .519
<b>Personal Distress</b>	-.40 (.16) <i>p</i> = .015	-.87 (.19) <i>p</i> < .001	-.47 (.14) <i>p</i> = .001	-.36 (.11) <i>p</i> = .001
<b>Have Run for Office</b>				.02 (.23) <i>p</i> = .935
<b>Concern × Run</b>				.01 (.32) <i>p</i> = .967
<b>Controls?</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>N</b>	2266	2268	2266	2258

*NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses. Full model results available in the Supplementary Material. Dependent variable in first column is the self-reported likelihood of running for elected office. Dependent variable in the second column is the likelihood of accepting an appointment to office. Dependent variable in third and fourth columns is the difference between these two measures (appointed minus elected).*