

Perceptions of Party Incongruence and Nascent Political Ambition

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Abstract: Recent elections reveal a rise in first-time candidates. Building on prior works on nascent political ambition, we examine how ideological incongruence with one's party relates to the initial development of interest in running for office. We advance the theory that individuals will be more motivated to run when they view their party as failing to represent their preferred position. Using two nationally representative surveys, we find support for this hypothesis, as we show that people are more likely to develop political ambition when they perceive themselves as ideologically distant from their party. Finally, using a panel study, we show that ideological distance predicts running for office for the first time. Our findings further highlight how the factors that contribute to the initial formation of ambition differ from the strategic concerns driving more advanced career decisions and illustrate another potential side-effect of ideological disagreement within parties.

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“It’s time we acknowledge that not all Democrats are the same. A Democrat who takes corporate money, profits off of foreclosure, doesn’t live here, doesn’t send his kids to our schools, doesn’t drink our water or breathe our air, cannot possibly represent us...”

- Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY14), First Campaign Ad, 2018¹

In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sought political office for the first time in her life. Ocasio-Cortez had worked for Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign as a community organizer, while also waiting tables at a variety of bars and restaurants in the Bronx. Disappointed by what she viewed as the big money, corporate nature of the Democratic Party, Ocasio-Cortez became the first Democratic challenger to Democratic Caucus Chair Joe Crowley since 2004. Ocasio-Cortez’s rhetoric and campaign ads consistently highlighted her disappointment with her fellow Democrats, suggesting that she and most other New Yorkers felt unrepresented by Democrats, and that this failure of representation motivated her to seek a change within her own party. That is, Ocasio-Cortez’s perceptions of a party failing to represent her effectively resulted in her development of some nascent political ambition that ultimately led to her defeat of Crowley and eventual election to the US House of Representatives.

Though Ocasio-Cortez captured national attention as an apparent outlier, she was actually just one of 158 first-time candidates to win a Democratic nomination for a House seat in 2018.² And this group of 2018 Democratic candidates is part of a larger trend of amateurs entering and winning U.S. House races. Since about 2010 and the emergence of the Tea Party movement, the

¹ Full replication data for this project can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TH6OWH>.

Supplemental Appendices are maintained on the contact author’s website. This initial ad can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq3QXIVR0bs>

² <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/11/white-men-democratic-house-candidates-813717>

percentage of inexperienced challengers winning open-seat primaries has risen sharply (Porter and Treul 2020), such that nearly half of all freshman members in the last three congresses had no previous experience in elected office.³ Thus, understanding what drives members of the general public to consider running for office is central to models of candidate emergence, as individuals must possess some basic, nascent political ambition before even weighing the pros and cons of pursuing any particular office (Fox and Lawless 2005; Lawless 2012)

We hypothesize that similar to Ocasio-Cortez, the development of ambition among political newcomers may be driven by a desire for change within their own parties. That is, we advance the hypothesis that nascent ambition will be greater among those who perceive a disconnect between themselves and what their own party is currently offering. While such a proposition is consistent with early work on political amateurs (e.g., Fishel 1971) and more recent accounts of anti-establishment sentiments within the Tea Party (e.g., Rouse, Hunt, and Essel 2021), we offer a more general theory of how dissatisfaction with one's party may motivate individuals to consider running for office. Using both a novel survey and data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we construct measures of perceived incongruence with the party and test how these perceptions are related to nascent political ambition. We find that individuals' desire to seek office increases with greater perceived ideological distance from their party. Though this tendency is greater among Republicans, we still find evidence of an effect among members of both parties. Lastly, we leverage data from the 2010-2014 CCES panel study to show that ideological distance is also a significant predictor of

³ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-more-inexperienced-candidates-are-running-and-winning/>

actual entry into the candidate pool. Thus, although Americans are increasingly dissatisfied with the two major parties,⁴ this frustration may be motivating individuals to step up rather than tune out.

Perceptions of Party Incongruence and Political Ambition

Existing works have long shown that those seeking political careers tend to engage in rational evaluations of the political context (Black 1972; Schlesinger 1966). That is, those with upward ambitions are strategic and weigh the relative costs and benefits when deciding if and when to seek higher office (Maestas et al. 2006). Perhaps most relevant to the topic explored here, studies of state legislators suggest that considerations about the ability to successfully campaign and legislate among like-minded colleagues shape decisions about whether or not to pursue a seat in the U.S. House (Aldrich and Thomsen 2017; Thomsen 2014; 2015).

Though policy motivations are central to party fit theory, individuals at this late stage of the candidate emergence process consider these motivations as they strategically “estimate their likelihood of winning” and “assess their future policy impact and their prospective influence in the legislative chamber” (Thomsen 2014, p. 788). We, however, are looking the formation of nascent ambitions, which precede these kinds of strategic calculations and are much more divorced from the political opportunity structure (Fox and Lawless 2005). At this early stage, individuals should also be driven by policy preferences, but not yet engaging in calculations about the likelihood those preferences will be realized into law.

⁴ For example, see <https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2018/9/17/17870478/two-party-system-electoral-reform>. Accessed 9/25/2020.

This portion of our nascent ambition theory is consistent with a long line of work showing that amateurs – particularly the relatively large pool of apparently “sacrificial lamb” candidates who challenge seemingly invincible incumbents – behave in a manner that appears to be more motivated by policy than strategy (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Canon 1993; Deckman 2016; Frederick 2013; Lazarus 2008; Wilson 1962). Moreover, novices behave differently once elected to Congress. Those without previous legislative experience introduce more legislation, give more speeches, and cast significantly different roll-call votes (Little and Moore 2010; Meyer 2021).

In light of these clear differences, we expect that perceptions of party incongruence will operate differently among those who have not yet entered the political arena. Specifically, we expect amateurs will be more motivated when they feel that their own party is not adequately representing their goals. Said differently, we expect that as perception of ideological incongruence with one’s own party increase, nascent political ambition will also increase. We derive this hypothesis from research on approach, affect, and action that underlies much of the work linking emotion to political participation. Behavior approach system (BAS) theory specifies that when an individual’s expectations are met or exceeded, the subsequent positive emotions motivate action to maintain that success. Crucially, satisfaction or enthusiasm allows people to “coast” – they can simply maintain pre-existing habits, opinions, and behaviors and direct further efforts to other areas where their expectations are not being met (Carver 2003). But when an individual’s expectations are not met, the subsequent negative emotions drive actions to reach the desired outcome (Carver 2004). That is, “the first response to negative feelings is to try harder” (Carver 2003, p. 246). Feelings of anger tend to motivate punitive actions that are intended to correct others’ behaviors. Anger also encourages risk-acceptance (Lerner and Keltner

2001; Lerner and Keltner 2000), which may result in behavior a person would not otherwise engage in. Similarly, feelings of anxiety have been linked with openness to new information, and new strategies and behaviors that respond to the salient threat (Gadarian and Albertson 2014; Albertson and Gadarian 2015).

The behavioral implications differ depending on the source of threat. Threat from the out-party can be handled relatively easily. Partisans who feel that the out-party is threatening their interests and goals can merely double down on their support for the in-party, whose candidates represent a direct response to that threat. By supporting an ideologically aligned co-partisan, citizens can both work toward securing their goals and punish opposing partisans who threaten those goals. Thus, in this scenario, anger at and anxiety about the out-party should correspond with enthusiasm for the in-party, which will result in traditional forms of political participation and party-consistent voting (Brader 2005).

The consequences are different for citizens who feel their own party inadequately represents their goals. For these individuals, anger and anxiety cannot be easily resolved through traditional forms of support for the in-party. Instead, feelings of fear and anger will lead individuals to adopt new behaviors and strategies to cope with that threat (Brader 2005; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Indeed, anxiety and anger, in particular, have been linked with costly and novel forms of engagement (Ryan 2012; Valentino et al. 2011),⁵ including participation in protests (Banks, White, and McKenzie 2019) and political violence (Claassen

⁵ This holds outside of the U.S. as well, as dissatisfaction has been linked to non-voting participation in a multitude of contexts (e.g. Harrebey and Ejranes 2015; Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier 2010; Norris 2011).

2016). Anger about politics has also been linked with increased feelings of internal efficacy, or the belief that one is knowledgeable and competent in politics (Weber 2013). But most importantly, anger has been found to be associated with interest in running for office (Scott and Collins 2020). Specifically, Dittmar (2020) finds that frustration and other negative feelings about sitting leaders and the status quo were clearly major motivators of non-incumbent women running for office in 2018. Thus, in contrast to those who are satisfied with their party, we expect that those who are dissatisfied will be more open to novel and risky forms of participation, such as running for office for the first time.

While we focus on perceived ideological congruence rather than emotion, we contend that this represents a source of dissatisfaction and should be related to these types of negative emotional responses. Indeed, Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau (2007) show that even when evaluating the preferred candidate, an individual's anger increases as the distance between their own positions and the positions of the candidate increase. And while we recognize that there may be other sources of dissatisfaction, such as a failure to meaningfully address a specific issue (e.g. climate change) or a lack of demographic representation in party leadership positions, we focus our attention on ideology, an overarching representation of many of those other considerations.

A number of both early and recent works also support this focus on ideology. Contrary to what would be expected if early ambitions were fueled by a strategic desire to fit within the existing profile of the party, amateurs come from all ideological wings of a party (Fishel 1969), are less concerned about the consequences of their policy decisions (Prewitt 1970), and less likely to cite "a strong sense of party loyalty" when explaining their decisions to run for office (Fishel 1971). Thus, it seems that exploring how an individual views their alignment with the party should provide valuable insight into the aspirations (or lack thereof) of those in the

potential candidate pool. More recently, Conroy and Green (2020) find that those who are ambitious but have not yet run for office are more likely to describe their motivations with communal language that is more consistent with policy goals than with agentic language that would be more consistent with a simple desire to defeat the other side. As such, the analyses in the following sections build on these prior works and offer more direct testing of the party incongruence hypothesis.

Data and Key Variables

Following recent work on nascent ambition (Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland 2019; Dynes, Hassell, and Miles 2019; Kanthak and Woon 2015; Schneider et al. 2016; Preece and Stoddard 2015), we focus our analysis on the general population.⁶ We opt for this approach because our interest is in how perceptions of ideological congruence with the party impacts the composition of the entire potential candidate pool.⁷ A wide focus is also becoming increasingly important given the changing composition of the political class. While most politicians still follow

⁶ Indeed, in a recent Annual Review piece, Gulzar (2021, 257) calls for scholarship on political ambition to focus more heavily on the general population for fear that a focus on “high ability candidates” means that “scholars are unable to speak to how political entry operates in the entire population.”

⁷ In addition, recent work suggests that the gaps between elites and ordinary citizens has been overstated (Kertzer, n.d.). Still, to test our hypothesis on a more focused sample, we also split our sample between those with and without college degrees. Results available in the supplemental appendix shows that we find similar results across both subsamples.

traditional pathways (Thomsen and King 2020), the emergence of more amateur candidates has also coincided with a period of increasing occupational diversity in Congress.⁸ Thus, a more targeted sample would likely exclude many from this growing potential candidate pool.

Our data come from two national samples. First, we rely on an original survey fielded by YouGov during May 2016. The sample consists of 1,000⁹ respondents matched to the general population. Second, we use data from both the common content and the 1,000-respondent [name removed] team module of the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Luks 2019).¹⁰ We review the demographic makeups of both samples in the supplemental appendix.

Our dependent variable focuses on the self-selection side of nascent ambition formation. In their original discussion of nascent ambition, Fox and Lawless (2005) suggest that nascent ambition is defined as “the embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes the

⁸ We make this claim based on Brookings data compiled from the *Congressional Quarterly*.

These numbers show that between 2009 and 2021, there has been a decline in both the raw number and percentage of entries listed as business, banking, or law. See Chapter 1 of the *Vital Statistics on Congress* available here <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/>.

⁹ We report lower Ns in our analyses, as we exclude the 11% of respondents who failed an embedded attention check. To address the potential for satisficing on online surveys, we embedded an attention check in a survey grid (Berinsky et al. 2019). However, all of our key inferences reported below are unaffected by the decision to drop satisficers from the sample.

¹⁰ For more information about the CCES and its methodology, see <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

actual decision to enter a specific contest” (p. 643). Such a definition of the concept strongly implies that nascent ambition is both general (that is, not specific to a particular office) and latent. As such, we opt for the benefits that come with using a multi-measure approach to capture a latent concept (e.g. Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). We asked all respondents to “imagine that a local political organizer approached you about running for office” and then to report how likely they would be to consider running for seven levels of office (school board, city council, mayor, state legislator, governor, the House of Representatives, and the Senate). This measure is designed to capture interest in running for office under the assumption of some outside encouragement to run. Answers are recorded on a five-point scale running from not likely at all to extremely likely. We sum responses to create a political ambition variable ($\alpha=.92$) that ranges from 0 (the lowest value response to all offices) to 28 (the maximum response to all offices). Though ambition is fairly low ($\bar{X}_{2016} = 4.3$; $\bar{X}_{2018}=4.1$), there is meaningful variation in both 2016 and 2018 (i.e., the standard deviations are 5.8 and 5.7, respectively).¹¹

For our key independent variable, we focus on perceptions of ideological incongruence with one’s party. All respondents were asked to place themselves on a standard 7-point ideological scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. In the 2016 YouGov survey, we also asked respondents to place the *leaders* of each political party on the same ideological scale. In our analyses of the 2018 CCES, we rely on common content questions asking respondents to

¹¹ There may be some reason to worry about the inclusion of language regarding encouragement from a political organizer in our measures of political ambition. As such, we replicate our initial models of ambition using 2016 survey questions lacking this recruitment language in the supplemental appendix. Our results remain largely consistent with those we report below.

place both the Democrat and Republican Parties on the same 7-point ideological scale. Though one set of questions focuses specifically on leaders and the other focuses on the parties in general, both allow us to directly assess perceptions of ideological incongruence, which we operationalize as the absolute value of the distance between a respondent's ideology and their preferred party.¹² Across the two samples, respondents reported a meaningful lack of congruence with their own party, as the average reported distances are 1.5 in 2016 and 1.34 in 2018.¹³

As discussed above, the use of the self-placement scale is somewhat of a simplification; citizens may be motivated not just by general ideological concerns but by more specific policy concerns. However, the individual issues that would most likely be related to ambition vary both over time and across individuals.¹⁴ So since our theory is one of general dissatisfaction that is intended to apply across a variety of electoral contexts, we opt for this more summary approach.

Moreover, many of the more salient policy debates map well onto a single ideological dimension, particularly in a polarized era, and particularly among the politically engaged citizens who might be interested in running for office (Abramowitz 2011; Hare, Highton, and Jones

¹² For pure independents, we measure incongruence as the absolute distance from the nearest party. Our results are robust to using the more distant party.

¹³ We also use this approach to measure respondents' perceptions of ideological distance to the opposing party, providing us with measures of inparty incongruence and outparty incongruence.

¹⁴ For example, the timing of the height of the #metoo movement means that we would expect the issues related to that movement to be influential in 2018, but 2016. And even then, existing works suggest these effects would only be evident among women with a greater sense of linked fate (Jenkins, Poloni-Staudinger, and Strachan 2021).

2021). This, of course, also assumes that individuals are adept at using the 7-point scale to represent the positions of both themselves and their parties. The placement of the parties should be a minor concern, as research shows that individuals are quite capable of using a single ideological dimension to describe the positions of parties and their members (Hare et al. 2015). This suggests that their placements do accurately summarize the disagreements between parties, as well as the disagreements within parties.

More debateable may be individuals' self-placements. While it is often the case that ideological identifications are reflective of underlying issue preferences, there are those who choose their placements on the ideological scale for more symbolic reasons (Ellis and Stimson 2012). For example, some people with decidedly left-leaning preferences identify themselves as conservative in order to avoid the perceived stigmas associated with the liberal label (Schiffer 2000). Works exploring the different aspects of ideology, however, consistently find these types of conflicted ideologues to be in the minority (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Claassen, Tucker, and Smith 2015; Popp and Rudolph 2011).¹⁵ Such is the case in our samples,¹⁶ as we find strong correlations between ideological self-identification and operational ideology, as measured by issue attitudes ($r=.77$ in our YouGov sample; $r=.75$ in the CCES). Thus, we proceed with confidence in our key measures.

¹⁵ Across the various samples examined by these authors, estimates of the percentage of conflicted liberals ranges from 1.0 to 12.9, while estimates of the percentage of conflicted conservatives ranges from 9.7 to 30.0.

¹⁶ See the supplemental appendix for more information.

We are also able to offer a separate measure of ideological extremity. We operationalize this as a folded measure of ideology that ranges from 0 (moderate) to 3 (very liberal/conservative).¹⁷ The correlations between ideological extremity and perceived party incongruence are 0.32 in 2016 and 0.09 in 2018, suggesting a reasonably weak relationship between the two concepts. This also suggests that our samples include both moderates who feel their own party is too extreme and extremists who feel their own party is too moderate.¹⁸ The independent variation between extremity and distance allows us the opportunity to disentangle the roles of extremity and perceptions of distance in the formation of nascent ambition.

We also control for distance from the opposing party. Like our measure of incongruence with one's party, this measure is constructed using individuals' self-placements and their placements of the party with which they do not identify. This control accounts for findings that ideological extremists can increase turnout and participation among opposing partisans (Hall and

¹⁷ In the supplemental appendix, we show that using responses to a battery of issues rather than self-placement on the 7-point scale to represent extremity does not change our results. We point to the similarity between these two representations of ideological extremity as additional support for our use of the 7-point ideological scale in the construction of our party distance measures.

¹⁸ Ideological moderates (i.e. those placing themselves at 3, 4, or 5) comprise more than 30% of those who perceive themselves as greater than 1 unit away from the party in 2016 and more than 40% in 2018.

Thompson 2018; Simas and Ozer 2021).¹⁹ With measures of our dependent variable, our independent variable of interest, and our key controls in hand, we now turn towards assessing the relationships between these variables.

Results

We begin by reporting the results of Poisson regression models predicting self-reported political ambition as a function of respondents' perceived ideological distance from their own political party, the opposing political party, ideological extremity, and a number of demographic controls.²⁰

Table 1: The Effects of Party Distance on Political Ambition

Variable Name	2016 - Coefficient (Standard Error)	2018 - Coefficient (Standard Error)
Perceived Distance to In-Party	0.078* (0.013)	0.074* (0.015)
Perceived Distance to Out-Party	-0.010 (0.014)	-0.057* (0.012)
Ideological Extremity	0.062* (0.024)	0.085* (0.020)
Education	0.145* (0.013)	0.086* (0.012)
25-50 th Percentile Income	-0.141* (0.054)	-0.278* (0.060)
50 th -75 th Percentile Income	-0.263* (0.051)	-0.067 (0.052)
75 th -100 Percentile Income	-0.154* (-.066)	-0.037 (0.055)
No Response to Income	-0.264*	0.538*

¹⁹ We also consider the possibility that our two perceived distance variables might have a conditional effect on ambition. But as results in the supplemental appendix show, the interaction term is not statistically significant and its inclusion does not alter our main findings.

²⁰ See the supplemental appendix for details about the construction of these variables.

	(0.063)	(0.178)
Male	0.596*	0.361*
	(0.036)	(0.035)
Black	0.238*	0.199*
	(0.058)	(0.061)
Hispanic	0.196*	0.114
	(0.061)	(0.062)
Other Racial Identification	0.232*	0.268*
	(0.063)	(0.057)
Age	-0.016*	-0.014*
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Married	-0.017	0.132*
	(0.039)	(0.037)
Fulltime Employment Status	0.120*	0.100*
	(0.038)	(0.037)
Constant	1.130*	1.479*
	(0.080)	(0.082)
N	865	856
AIC	7138.1	7198.6

Note: Cell entries report coefficients from Poisson regression models predicting our ambition index summation using our 2016 sample (1), and our 2018 sample (2). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Sample in column (1) includes attentive respondents from a nationally representative sample administered by YouGov in the Fall of 2016. Sample in column (2) includes respondents to the XXX team content module of the 2018 CCES. * $p < .05$.

The results in Table 1 show that the effect of perceived inparty incongruence on the ambition index is positive and statistically significant in both the 2016 and 2018 samples. This indicates that ambition increases as respondents see themselves as more ideologically distant from their party. Importantly, the effect of ideological extremity is also positive and significant, which implies that holding the effects of inparty distance constant, more ideologically extreme respondents are also more likely to report high levels of nascent political ambition. Given that ideological extremity and ideological incongruence are related, this finding suggests that it is important for researchers to separate the effects of these two variables.²¹

To help visualize the magnitude of these effects, Figures 1 and 2 plot the predicted values of the ambition index as a function of both perceptions of inparty distance and self-reported ideological extremity, holding the other covariates in the model at their means or modes. As the figures demonstrate, the effects of inparty distance appear to be much larger than those of ideological extremity. Indeed, a move from the minimum to the maximum values of perceived inparty distance is associated with an increase in the ambition index from 4.97 to 7.94 in our 2016 sample, or an increase of 52% of a standard deviation in reported nascent ambition. In our 2018 sample, a move from the minimum to maximum values of inparty distance is associated with an increase in nascent ambition of roughly 33% of a standard deviation. Contrast this with the magnitude of the effect of ideological extremity. In 2016, holding covariates at their means and modes, a transition from the minimum to maximum value of ideological extremity is

²¹ In the supplemental appendix, we interact our measures of party distance with ideological extremity, and find no evidence of interactive effects of in-party distance and ideological extremity.

associated with a significant but much smaller increase in ambition equivalent to 18% of a standard deviation in the ambition index, and the same transition is associated with 21% of a standard deviation increase in 2018. Thus, while the effects of ideological extremity are consistently positive and significant, we see that the effects of perceptions of inparty distance are larger, and substantively important.

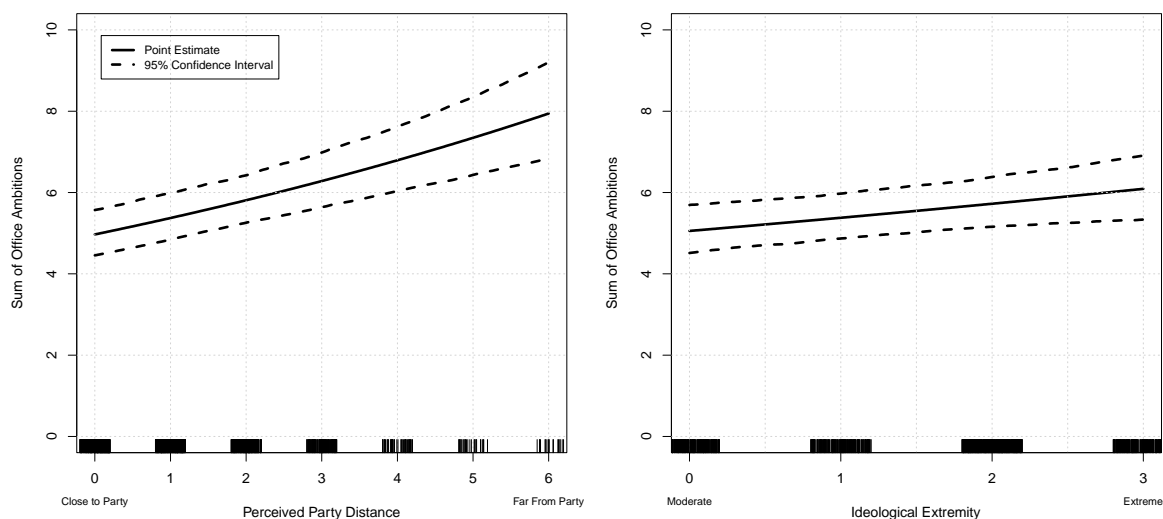


Figure 1: Predicted Effects of Perceived Party Distance and Ideological Extremity on Ambition for Office from 2016 YouGov Sample. The dependent variable is the count of respondents’ answers to a series of questions examining which political offices they might seek if asked.

While we advocate for the strengths for the multi-measure approach, we recognize that this may give rise to concerns about blending different levels of office and the effects that this may have on our results. To address this, we present several alternative models in the Supplemental Appendix. First, we utilize a different dependent variable that focuses on whether respondents had generically considered running for office before and whether they had taken steps to realize that consideration. Our initial results are mirrored in this model.

Second, rather than simply summing the 7 items into a single scale capturing latent ambition, we also create two nascent ambition scales, one for interest in lower-level offices and one for interest in higher level offices. We then replicate the main analyses from our manuscript using these two distinct scales. We again find support for our expectations, finding evidence that distance to one’s own party encourages nascent ambition for lower-level and higher-level offices.

Partisan Heterogeneity

The polarization of political elites has not been symmetric across political parties. While both parties have moved toward the extreme, since the mid-1970s, this trend is more pronounced among Republicans (Hare and Poole 2014). In addition, ideology has proven to be a much more salient factor for both elites and voters within the Republican Party (Grossman and Hopkins 2016). These partisan asymmetries raise the possibility that perceptions of inparty distance are different across party lines, and thus, also give rise to the possibility that the relationship between inparty distance and nascent political ambition might vary by party.

To evaluate this possibility, Table 2 replicates our models from Table 1, but splits our two samples into sets of Democratic and Republican identifiers.²² Two important things stand out about the results in Table 2. First, in three of the four estimated models, the effect of inparty distance on nascent political ambition is positive and statistically significant, while in the fourth, the effect is statistically insignificant. This suggests that party distance is strongly associated with nascent ambition among Republicans, and is associated with nascent ambition among Democrats in 2016. The decrease in the effect of inparty distance on nascent ambition among Democrats in 2018 may be a function of several things, including the party's stronger than usual concentration on defeating the incumbent president, Donald Trump (Dittmar 2020), or the increasing importance of ideological extremity in the formation of nascent ambition. Overall, however, the results are largely consistent with an ideological incongruence theory of nascent ambition.

²² Those who identify as pure independents are excluded from this analysis. Partisan leaners are coded as members of the party towards which they lean.

Table 2: The Effects of Party Distance on Political Ambition by Party

Variable Name	2016 Models		2018 Models	
	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Perceived Distance to In-Party	0.046* (0.020)	0.136* (0.024)	-0.031 (0.022)	0.103* (0.027)
Perceived Distance to Out-Party	0.075* (0.028)	0.084* (0.036)	-0.093* (0.019)	-0.117* (0.022)
Ideological Extremity	0.054 (0.043)	-0.181* (0.057)	0.117* (0.030)	0.136* (0.037)
Education	0.101* (0.021)	0.103* (0.024)	0.087* (0.019)	0.060* (0.019)
25-50 th Percentile Income	0.254* (0.075)	-0.404* (0.115)	-0.563* (0.090)	-0.014 (0.106)
50 th -75 th Percentile Income	-0.114 (0.072)	-0.251* (0.109)	-0.225* (0.072)	-0.046 (0.097)
75 th -100 Percentile Income	-0.091 (0.099)	-0.156 (0.131)	-0.040 (0.073)	0.021 (0.102)
No Response to Income	-0.367* (0.105)	-0.216 (0.126)	0.563* (0.187)	
Male	0.397* (0.052)	0.831* (0.069)	0.283* (0.052)	0.443* (0.061)
Black	0.313* (0.071)	0.660* (0.229)	0.451* (0.072)	0.185 (0.312)
Hispanic	-0.155 (0.111)	-0.315* (0.145)	0.221* (0.086)	0.209 (0.116)
Other Racial Identification	0.204* (0.094)	0.256* (0.127)	0.295* (0.085)	0.521* (0.089)
Age	-0.012* (0.002)	-0.025* (0.002)	-0.011* (0.002)	-0.016* (0.002)
Married	-0.129* (0.060)	-0.013 (0.070)	0.057 (0.056)	0.154* (0.062)
Fulltime Employment Status	0.011 (0.060)	0.154* (0.067)	-0.051 (0.057)	0.152* (0.064)
Constant	0.894* (0.136)	1.492* (0.158)	1.714* (0.127)	1.691* (0.138)
N	388	301	399	336
AIC	3120	2254.8	3241.9	2835.1

Note: Cell entries report coefficients from Poisson regression models predicting our ambition index summation using our 2016 sample (1 & 2), and our 2018 sample (3 & 4). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Sample in columns (1 & 2) includes attentive respondents from a nationally representative sample administered by YouGov in the Fall of 2016. Samples in column (3 & 4) includes respondents to the XXX team content module of the 2018 CCES. In the 2018 sample, all Republicans responded to the income question. * p <.05.

The second important result to note in Table 2 is that in keeping with extant work on asymmetric polarization, our results suggest that the effects of inparty distance on nascent ambition are much stronger for Republicans than they are for Democrats. The effects of inparty distance on Republicans are larger in magnitude than the same effects for Democrats and are consistent across elections. This implies that for Republican respondents, perceiving the Republican Party as being ideologically distant spurs the development of early political ambitions. Again, to aid in the interpretation of these results Figure 3 plots the predicted value of our ambition index as inparty distance increases for Democratic and Republican respondents based on our 2016 model results in Table 2.²³ As the figure makes plain, the effects of perceived inparty distance on nascent ambition are much larger for Republicans. Indeed, moving from the minimum to the maximum in perceived inparty distance is associated with an increase in nascent ambition among Democrats of roughly 23% of a standard deviation in 2016, while the same shift among Republicans is associated with 106% standard deviation increase in nascent ambition. Our findings are thus consistent with Hare and Poole's (2014, 428) assertion that "in the electorate as well as in Congress, then, there appear to be greater internal stresses within the Republican Party between the ideological center and right."

²³ A similar figure for the 2018 models can be provided upon request.

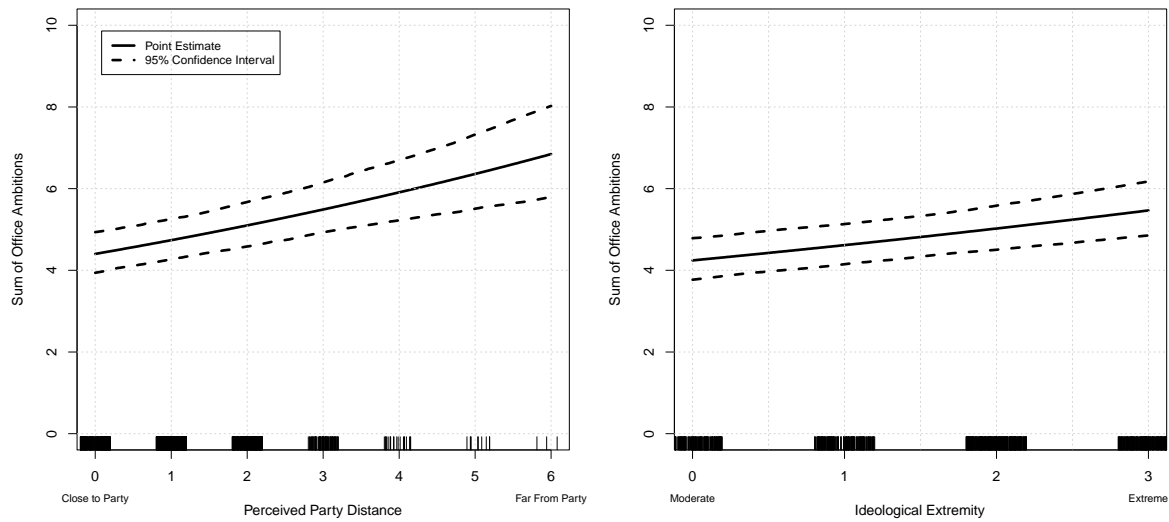


Figure 2: Predicted Effects of Perceived Party Distance and Ideological Extremity on Ambition for Office from 2018 CCES Sample. The dependent variable is the count of respondents' answers to a series of questions examining which political offices they might seek if asked.

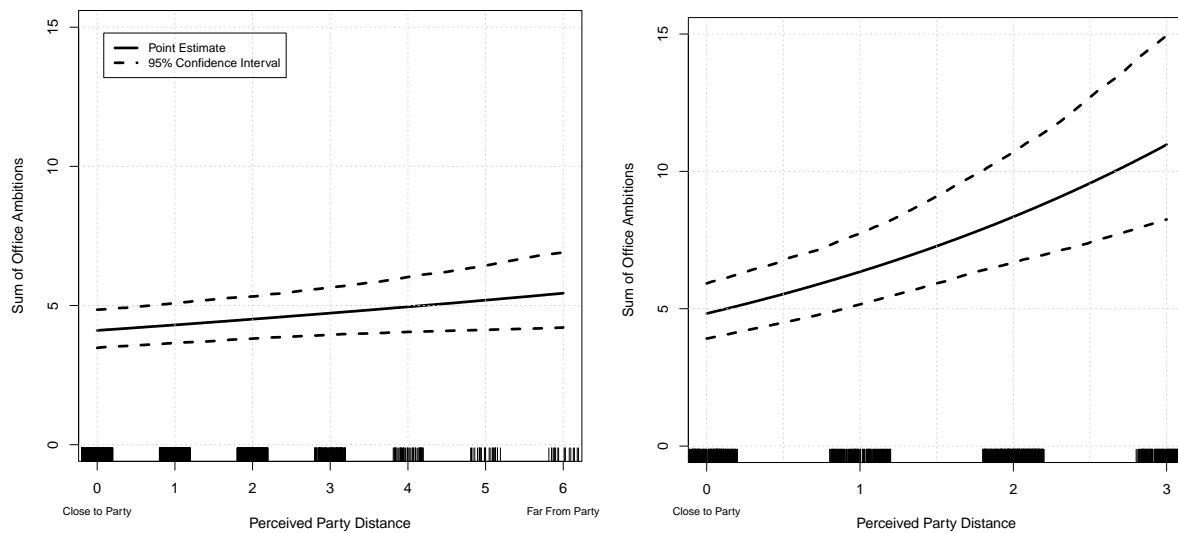


Figure 3: Predicted Effects of Perceived Party Distance on Ambition for Office for Democrats (L) and Republicans (R) from 2016 YouGov Sample. The dependent variable is the count of respondents' answers to a series of questions examining which political offices they might seek if asked.

Partisan Congruence and Seeking Office for the First Time

So far, our evidence suggests that members of the electorate are more likely to develop nascent ambition when they perceive some level of ideological disagreement with their own party. In this section, we attempt to better connect this early stage in the candidate emergence process to *actual* entry into the political arena. To do so, we take advantage of the 2010-2014 CCES panel survey, which asks respondents whether they have run for office in the past. This retrospective question wording means that we cannot test our expectations about party congruence and nascent ambition using the cross-sectional administrations of the CCES. However, the 2010-2014 CCES panel also asks these retrospective questions of 9500 respondents in three waves (2010, 2012, and 2014). In the following analysis, we create a new dependent variable coded 1 if a respondent to the panel survey reported not having run for office

in the 2010 wave, but reported having run for office in 2014. This response pattern implies that a respondent sought office for the first time after the 2010 wave of the survey. Those who report never having sought office, or having sought office prior to the 2010 wave of the survey are coded 0.

We then predict whether respondents seek office for the first time between the 2010 and 2014 surveys as a function of their 2010 survey responses. An association between party distance and our new dependent variable would indicate that respondents who perceived high (or low) ideological distance between themselves and their own party in 2010, were more (or less) likely to seek office sometime between 2010 and 2014. In keeping with the other models we have reported thus far, our measure of distance is constructed the same as before²⁴ and we include the same set of control variables from our earlier models. Table 3 reports the results of a logistic regression predicting whether respondents reported running for office between 2010 and 2014 (so expressing having sought office in either the 2012 or 2014 waves of the CCES) as a function of their perceptions of party distance in 2010 and our other standard control variables.

²⁴ To test our assumption that self-placement on the 7-point ideological scale is representative of policy preferences, we again compare these placements to responses to an issue battery. More detail is available in the supplemental appendix, but as with the other samples, the correlation is relatively strong ($r=.81$).

As the table illustrates, the association between perceived party distance and subsequent seeking of election is positive and significant.²⁵ This indicates that as a respondent perceives greater distance from their party in 2010, that person becomes more likely to report having sought elected office for the first time in future waves of the panel survey. The magnitude of the coefficient suggests that a one-unit increase in perceived party distance is associated with an increase in the odds of seeking office of 31.3%. Given how few respondents seek office for the first time in this window (88 total respondents), this is a substantively important increase in the odds that a respondent enters the electoral arena. Indeed, perceptions of party distance, education, and gender are the only covariates that are statistically significantly associated with seeking office for the first time, suggesting that perceptions of party distance should be slotted alongside other traditional explanations for why candidates run for office for the first time.²⁶

And importantly, this analysis of actual candidate entry also suggests that the connections we find between party incongruence and nascent ambition are meaningful. Even if some individuals in our two nascent ambition samples are offering more top-of-the-head responses, the fact that we find the same pattern of results among those who actually did take the leap and run

²⁵ We also estimated an alternative model in which we predict whether or not a respondent reports having run for office in 2014 and controlling for whether the respondent reported having run for office in previous waves. The results are substantively identical.

²⁶ In the supplemental appendix, we provide a set of placebo regressions predicting respondents' probability of reporting other rare events, like being the victim of a crime and visiting the ER. As we would expect, both of these dependent variables are unrelated to perceptions of in-party distance.

for office suggests this connection is more than just hypothetical.²⁷ Consistent with our theoretical expectations, it seems that dissatisfaction as represented by incongruence with the party's ideological position is positively related to thinking about *and actually* running for office for the first time.

²⁷ Moreover, the offices that individuals sought aligns with what would be expected given responses to our nascent ambition questions; individuals were more interested in and more likely to run for lower-level offices (e.g. school board, city council).

Table 3: The Effects of Party Distance on Running for Office

Variable Name	Run for office – Coefficient (Standard Error)
Perceived Distance to In-Party	0.272* (0.099)
Perceived Distance to Out-Party	0.012 (0.110)
Ideological Extremity	0.057 (0.180)
Education	0.271* (0.086)
25-50 th Percentile Income	1.982 (1.066)
50 th -75 th Percentile Income	1.538 (1.032)
75 th -100 Percentile Income	1.574 (1.035)
Male	0.591* (0.253)
Black	0.523 (0.441)
Hispanic	0.324 (0.470)
Other Racial Identification	-0.505 (0.595)
Age	-0.018 (0.010)
Married	0.325 (0.267)
Fulltime Employment Status	-0.438 (0.249)
Constant	-7.384* (1.212)
	N 8714
	AIC 936.08

Note: Cell entries report coefficients from Logistic regression models predicting a respondent reporting having run for office between 2010 and 2014. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Covariates are all based on respondents' self-reports in 2010 waves of 2010-2014 CCES. * $p < .05$.

Conclusions

Understanding the development of nascent ambition among the general public is critical to social science's efforts to understand representation, policymaking, and elite polarization. To have a well-developed understanding of these concepts requires a similar understanding of who self-selects into the electoral arena. Studies have long recognized this (Lasswell 1948; Schlesinger 1966), and over the years, the collective literature has offered compelling explanations for why potential candidates might seek office (Conroy and Green 2020; Krebs 1999; Maisel and Stone 1997, 2014), why young people are turned off from politics (Lawless and Fox 2015), or why women are less likely to seek political office (Fox and Lawless 2014; Fulton et al. 2006; Kanthak and Woon 2015b; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Thomsen and King 2020). We add to these works by exploring how one's perceived ideological distance from their own party impacts the development of their desire to eventually seek office.

Our findings suggest that members of the public are more likely to develop nascent ambition and run for office for the first time when they see their party as being ideologically distant, rather than proximate to themselves. Leveraging a variety of surveys, we find consistent evidence that citizens who perceive themselves as more ideologically distant from their party are more interested in running for office and more likely to actually seek elected office. One implication of these findings is that candidate self-selection may help counter increasing elite polarization. Since party distance motivated both extremists and moderates in our samples,

parties that creep too far toward the ideological poles may be pulled back in by new candidates who are dissatisfied with the policies being delivered.²⁸

However, what we actually observe – particularly among Republicans – also suggests somewhat of a dilemma for parties. In general, parties want to avoid challenges from within, as these types of contests can create divisions, consume important resources, and ultimately, decrease the chances of a general election victory (Fournaies and Hall 2020). Our party incongruence findings suggest that one way to do this would be to take positions that are closer to those of any would-be challengers. Yet, because these incongruent members also tend to be extreme, doing so would open parties up to the potential for swings in turnout and long-term losses that have been associated with the nomination of extremist candidates (Hall 2015; Hall and Thompson 2018). As such, party elites must strategically consider these tradeoffs as they recruit candidates and cultivate their party brands.

But even if the potential candidate pool does continue to pull parties to the extremes, our findings still have some positive normative implications in that they suggest that those who feel ignored or underrepresented are not completely shut out of the political process. If party elites continue to become increasingly homogeneous as they move to the extremes, then the set of policies not represented should also grow and potentially increase the pool of individuals who see the party as failing to meet to their needs. And, as outside funding increases (e.g. Maestas and Rugeley 2008) and anti-establishment candidates continue to experience success (Hansen

²⁸ This proposition is supported by Porter and Treul (2020), who find that inexperienced candidates have become more likely to win U.S. House primaries and that inexperienced candidates who do win are not significantly more extreme than the candidates they defeat.

and Treul 2021), the prospect of running without the full support of the party should become less and less daunting. Of course, there is more to be done in understanding these and other key factors that may push someone from just being ambitious to actually running for office. But still, the fact that those who are more distant are more likely to be in the potential candidate pool suggests that running for office is viewed as a viable path to bringing about change.

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