

RESEARCH

Gender and ambitions for elected and appointed political positions: insights from Norway

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This article contributes to the emerging scholarship on the gender gap in political ambitions. While appointed party positions offer politically minded people the opportunity to have further political careers outside the elected path, the extent to which women prefer such alternative careers is unclear. This article investigates the gender gap in the political ambitions of young people in Norway. Studying the gender gap in a country with numerous role models and established opportunity structures allows us to understand how individual and contextual factors might affect ambitions for different elected and appointed political positions. This research also explores the impact of personality and upbringing. The article draws on a 2019–20 survey of young party member elites. Multivariate analysis reveals that gender is a main factor in differences in ambition for elected positions but less so for appointed positions.

Key words political ambitions • gender gap • youth politics • elected positions • appointed positions • Norway

Key messages

- Gender can explain differences in ambition for elected political positions in Norway.
- Male and female youth politicians are equally interested in appointed political positions.
- Youth politicians who are competitive, self-confident, determined, leader-like, achievement oriented and socially confident have higher political ambitions (both elected and appointed).

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Introduction

The US has a long-standing tradition of studying the gender gap in political ambitions (Costantini, 1990). Several empirical studies have established that men are more inclined to consider running for office at some point in the future (Fox and Lawless, 2005; 2014); they also hold stronger wishes for a concrete position in politics (Pruysers and Blais, 2017). By comparison, considerations of this gender gap in other countries appear somewhat piecemeal (Schwindt-Bayer, 2011; Folke and Rickne, 2016).

Recent research has suggested that, in certain countries, women are interested in political positions that can influence policy but not necessarily elected positions (Bauer and Darkwah, 2020). The literature on the professionalisation of parties has found that a political class consists not only of elected politicians, but also of paid staffers, consultants and advisers (Allen and Cairney, 2017). However, the extent to which women prefer such alternative political careers – outside the elected paths – is yet to be considered.

In response, this article examines ambitions for different political positions. More specifically, it asks: do women prefer other types of political position? And does the gender gap depend on the type of position involved? The study examines the effect of gender on ambitions for elected and appointed political positions. It also investigates the correlated importance of personality and parental socialisation since recent contributions have underlined the ways in which personality traits explain differences in political ambition (Blais et al, 2019; Allen and Cutts, 2020; Weinberg, 2021; Dynes et al, 2021) and showed how politically active parents can develop young people's political consciousness and help their interest in pursuing future political careers (Van Liefferinge and Steyvers, 2009; Heidar and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019).

This study is based on a 2019–20 survey of Norwegian youth party elites ($n = 478$). Some of the existing literature on political ambitions has focused on students (Fox and Lawless, 2014; Pruyers and Blais, 2017) or well-established politicians (Maestas, 2003; Høyland et al, 2019). Important work has also been done on those who aspire to politics (Fox and Lawless, 2005), are in low-level political positions (Dynes et al, 2019; 2021; Scott and Medeiros, 2020) or are in candidate training programmes (Bernhard et al, 2021). In line with these latter studies, youth politicians are a subset of the population that is likely to have a higher number of individuals with political ambitions. Some will want to climb the party ladder; in their eyes, membership in youth parties offers substantial advantages for their political career development (Hooghe et al, 2004). Others have no long-term ambitions for themselves in politics, having joined the party simply to meet like-minded people and make new friends (Bruter and Harrison, 2009b). Of the former, representations of gender among politically ambitious young people give some advance notice of gender (in)equality in politics to come.

Norway is a country with an established tradition of gender equality, though women remain somewhat under-represented in politics, especially in parliament. In a country where role models are numerous and appropriate opportunity structures should be in place, this study will contribute to understanding how individual and contextual factors may affect ambitions for different political positions, which, in turn, may account for divergences in representation. The study thus answers the call for large surveys of rank-and-file party members to investigate ambitions among different political tiers or positions (Coffé and Davidson-Schmich, 2020: 80).

Here, the multivariate analysis reveals that gender may act as a main differentiator in ambitions for elected positions but less so for appointed positions. The effect of gender is robust when controlling for an ambitious personality, that is, someone who is competitive, self-confident, determined, leader-like, achievement oriented and socially confident. Although the study supports the notion that women are less interested than men in elected positions, the results also suggest that women may

be less eager to pursue certain top positions in politics (both elected and appointed) because some positions are more visible or prominent than others.

Political ambitions and youth parties

Ambition has been called the ‘raw material of politics’ (Maestas et al, 2006: 195). As Schlesinger (1966: 1) notes in his path-breaking work, ‘ambition lies at the heart of politics’. According to Schlesinger, politicians are ambitious actors targeting certain political offices. He divides political ambitions into three categories: discrete, static and progressive. Discrete ambitions relate to positions sought within certain periods; static ambitions relate to positions sought repeatedly; and progressive ambitions relate to the wish to reach higher positions of power. Fox and Lawless (2005: 643), meanwhile, have argued that ‘nascent’ political ambition is the ‘embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest’. Nascent political ambitions should be seen as a prerequisite for Schlesinger’s progressive ambitions (Lawless, 2012). Such nascent ambitions have been widely scrutinised, with researchers asking respondents whether they intend to run for political office or how qualified they feel to do so.

The ultimate goal of a youth politician may be to become a mayor, a member of parliament (MP), a cabinet minister or even the prime minister. While parties in established democracies have experienced declining membership over recent decades, their financial resources have increased, and they have come to rely increasingly on paid professionals, such as advisers and campaigners. For the politically motivated, this represents an alternative political career path. In their study of Norwegian party employees, Karlsen and Saglie (2017) identified five principal future career paths: top-level politician, party employee, political appointee, public relations (PR) consultant and public sector. While the latter two represent career paths outside politics, the first three can be considered political careers: the first encompasses elected positions, while party employees and political appointees are synonymous with this alternative path to political career making.

Although there is a growing body of literature on youth parties or youth party branches (Bruter and Harrison, 2009a), few studies have focused on the political ambitions of youth politicians. Some, however, have scrutinised why certain people become party members and the extent to which this motivation is linked to ambition. For example, Bruter and Harrison (2009b: 1265) have noted that ‘the prospect of becoming a politician ... can be a very serious source of motivation for a young person’. According to Scarrow (2015: 158), the offer of career advancement opportunities through parties is particularly attractive to young members, who are more focused on building their careers ‘than those at other life stages’.

Based on an online survey of young members from 15 parties across six European democracies, Bruter and Harrison (2009b) have distinguished three types of political activists: moral-minded, social-minded and professional-minded. On average, professional-minded members – young people who want to become politicians, to run for elections and to access positions of responsibility quickly – are the least common of the three. In an online survey of Social Democratic Party (SPD) members under the age of 36 in Germany, Weber (2020) defined 13 incentives to join a political party; however, only 35 per cent of respondents said that ‘interest

in a party office or mandate' was either important or very important in their rationale for joining. By comparison, 93 per cent claimed that the desire to 'change something in society' was an important or very important reason for joining – more reminiscent of Bruter and Harrison's moral-minded or social-minded types of activism. Similarly, in a postal survey of youth movements from the three main political parties in the UK (Conservative Future, Young Labour/Labour Students and Liberal Youth), [Rainsford \(2018\)](#) found that young members' participation was, to some degree, motivated by standing for election (41 per cent agreement) and working in politics (48 per cent agreement), compared to 93 per cent agreement for the desire to 'express my views'.

Gender and political ambitions

Several research studies have empirically demonstrated the gap in political ambitions between men and women. For instance, in their study of 4,000 US high school and college students, [Fox and Lawless \(2014: 501\)](#) found that 35 per cent of women had considered running for office, compared to 48 per cent of men. A significant gender gap in political ambitions has also been recorded in Canada. In their study of 500 Canadian undergraduate students, [Pruysers and Blais \(2017: 240\)](#) found that men were significantly more likely (71.4 per cent) than women (49.5 per cent) to place a career in politics (as a MP, prime minister or city/town mayor) anywhere in their top five career choices. Conversely, the gap appears to be somewhat narrower in Latin American countries ([Schwindt-Bayer, 2011](#)) and in Europe. In their survey of over 10,000 municipal politicians in Sweden, for instance, [Folke and Rickne \(2016: 90\)](#) found no 'pronounced differences' between gender-based distributions of political career ambitions. On the contrary, others have asserted the existence of a certain gender gap in Sweden when it comes to accepting political positions at local and regional levels ([Ministry of Culture, 2001](#)). Hence, although the gender gap may be comparatively narrower than in the US and Canada, a gap can nevertheless be expected among Norwegian youth politicians.

However, the effect of gender may also depend on the specific type of political position. Experimental studies have shown how women appear more likely than men to shy away from competitions and to be more election-averse ([Niederle and Vesterlund, 2011](#); [Kanthak and Woon, 2015](#); [Preece and Stoddard, 2015](#)). This gender gap has been attributed to the context of campaigns and the costs of elections ([Kanthak and Woon, 2015](#)). Elsewhere, [Bauer and Darkwah \(2020\)](#) have shown that Ghanaian women want to influence policy and have designs on political leadership, though they lack ambitions for elected office. Equally, electoral politics can be costly and derogatory, and women may prefer less visible political positions as a result. Based on the foregoing, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Male youth politicians will have stronger ambitions for elected positions than female youth politicians.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Female youth politicians will have stronger ambitions for appointed positions than male youth politicians.

Alternative drivers of political ambitions

Political ambitions have traditionally been seen as a product of opportunity structures (Schlesinger, 1966). More recently, however, scholars have shown how various demographic, socio-economic and psychological factors can also affect political ambitions (Fox and Lawless, 2014; Blais et al, 2019; Allen and Cutts, 2020). Looking beyond gender, this study also elaborates on two key differentiating factors in political ambitions among youth politicians: personality and upbringing.

First, *personality* may have a sizeable effect on political ambitions. In recent years, several studies have linked individual personality traits with political ambitions. Personality traits are stable and deep-seated psychological constructs (Bøggild et al, 2019) that exist before (nascent) ambitions towards a political career or (progressive) ambitions towards specific positions in the future (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). In their aforementioned study of Canadian undergraduate students, Pruyers and Blais (2017) determined that extraversion and higher levels of openness to experience are positively related to nascent political career ambitions; the same has been found to be true of a representative sample of US citizens ($n = 1,939$) (Dynes et al, 2019). By contrast, conscientious and agreeable individuals are significantly less interested in holding elected offices (Dynes et al, 2019: 320).

Moreover, in a comparison of UK MPs and unsuccessful parliamentary candidates with British citizens, Weinberg (2021) found that both elected and aspiring MPs have different psychological compositions to the general public, for example, elected and aspiring MPs attribute significantly greater importance to values of self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence) compared to their constituents. Studies have also found that political ambitions are driven by ‘dark’ personality traits (Peterson and Palmer, 2019); considering a representative sample of Canadian voters, Blais, Pruyers and Chen (2019) have asserted that political ambitions are most consistently related to lower levels of honesty and humility, and to higher levels of extraversion and narcissism. That said, this article turns away from dark personality traits like Machiavellianism; rather, the focus here is on brighter personality traits such as self-confidence, determination and a lack of social anxiety – as important prerequisites for future political careers.

Second, *political upbringing* may have a bearing on political ambitions. For example, kitchen-table discussions and other political experiences in early life can affect young people’s interest in pursuing political careers (Heidar and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). Through processes of socialisation, political interests may grow because parents are politically active, cultivating political curiosity and knowledge (Jennings et al, 2009). When young people have politically active parents, they tend to develop a political consciousness, which pulls them towards later political participation (Van Lieffering and Steyvers, 2009). Oskarsson, Dawes and Lindgren (2018) have found that the effects of pre-birth factors (such as genes) and post-birth factors (such as parental socialisation) on the likelihood of standing as a political candidate were approximately equal in size. In turn, growing up with one or both parents who are politically active will, through a process of political socialisation, instil in future citizens ‘the belief that they, as individuals, have the power to influence government action’ (Fox and Lawless, 2005: 464). In their study of nearly 3,800 US citizens, Fox and Lawless (2005) identified a politicised upbringing as a significant predictor of considering candidacy. Respondents raised in homes where politics is frequently

discussed are much more likely to possess nascent political ambition as adults (Fox and Lawless, 2005: 653). Similarly, in Europe, a study of Belgian mayors has shown that 59 per cent of respondents referred to either one or both parents as having influenced their path to mayoralty (Van Liefferinge and Steyvers, 2009: 135). Based on the foregoing, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Youth politicians with an ambitious personality will have stronger political ambitions (both elected and appointed) compared to youth politicians with a less ambitious personality.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Youth politicians with politicised upbringings will have stronger political ambitions (both elected and appointed) compared to youth politicians without such upbringings.

Testing the hypotheses relies on a study distributed among Norwegian youth party elites.

Research context and methodology

In 1978, the Norwegian Gender Equality Act aimed to improve the position of women in society. When Gro Harlem Brundtland became the country's first female prime minister in 1986, she appointed a cabinet with 44 per cent female ministers, and the parliamentary representation of women has steadily increased since the 1960s. However, this representation has stagnated somewhat: the share of female parliamentarians hovers around 40 per cent, and the proportion of female cabinet ministers remains below 50 per cent. Norway has had a female prime minister (Erna Solberg) since 2013, and recently the finance minister (Siv Jensen) and party leaders (Trine Schei Grande and Siv Jensen) have been women. All Norwegian parties except the Progress Party and the Greens have implemented gender-based quotas concerning internal party bodies and candidate election lists (Teigen et al, 2019: 405). Comparatively, therefore, Norway stands as a country with several role models and well-developed opportunity structures for the advancement of gender equality.

Youth parties have existed in Norway since the early 1900s. Norwegian youth parties are more than just social clubs for activists. They are their own organisations, with a similar structure as their parent party, with local branches, regional boards and central secretariats. In some youth parties, the regional leader is a directly elected member of the parent party's regional board. Youth representatives therefore act as important links between the parent party and the youth party.

Several elected and appointed political positions in Norway are relevant to youth politicians with aspirations of a future career in politics. Norway is a parliamentary democracy, with nine parties represented in its 169-seat parliament. Each of the 20 cabinet ministers is supported by one or two junior ministers (called state secretaries) and one political adviser. Although the state secretaries are not part of the cabinet, they function as stand-ins for the minister and are therefore important actors in executive government. The political advisers are appointed by the Prime Minister's Office to serve an individual minister; they tend to be relatively young and have limited executive powers.

Norway has 356 municipalities, each of which is led by a municipal council, whose central political actor is the mayor. Parliamentary party groups across Western democracies generally receive more financial support from their corresponding constituencies (Heidar and Koole, 2003). In Norway, for instance, this has enabled party groups to hire more professional staffers and advisers. Alongside their work in the party organisation, this represents an alternative career path for politically motivated individuals.

Research data and methods

To investigate the gendered ambitions for elected and appointed political positions among Norwegian youth politicians, the research team designed and distributed an online survey through Questback in 2019–20. Within the nine Norwegian youth parties, leaders of the local branches, members of the regional boards and representatives from the central organisations were approached to take part. The scope of the survey, therefore, was the youth party elites rather than the rank-and-file members.

For some youth parties, the email addresses of party members were available online. Others were approached and asked to provide contact email addresses. Of all regional boards (nine parties in 19 counties), only three failed to respond and provide emails. As a result, the 933 email addresses received closely represented the full universe of Norwegian youth party elites.

After three reminders, a response rate of 51 per cent was obtained ($n = 478$). Of this sample, 27 per cent were from the local branch leadership, 36 per cent were members of the regional boards, 19 per cent held positions in the central youth party and the final 18 per cent had multiple affiliations. In terms of bias, little is known/available about the population of youth party elites. In general, Norwegian party members are 35 per cent female to 65 per cent male (Heidar et al, 2019: 81); the current sample was 49.5 per cent male and 50.5 per cent female. All nine parties were represented by the 478 respondents. However, compared to the membership numbers from their parent parties, some youth parties were over-represented, while others were under-represented (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Online Appendix¹).

To measure political ambition, the survey relied on a question about different positions the respondents would want to attain at some point in the future (Table 1). As Table 1 shows, youth politicians envisage having different future positions: the majority want, to a large extent, to be elected members of the municipal council, to have hired party positions or to become MPs. To become prime minister is the least popular; nonetheless, 20 per cent of respondents stated their desire, to a large (or very large) extent, to rise to the top position in the Norwegian parliamentary system at some point in the future.

The eight positions outlined in Table 1 will form dependent variables in the analysis. The following results distinguish between top elected positions (PM, cabinet minister and MP), local elected positions (mayor and local politician) and appointed positions (state secretary, political adviser and hired party position). Explanatory variables are gender, personality and upbringing; age and party are used as controls.

Gender was measured through a direct question in the survey. To quantify an ambitious personality, the research team drew on the Hogan Personality Inventory

Table 1: Progressive career ambitions of youth politicians

	Not at all					To a large extent
	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Member of municipal council (local politician)	7	9	20	25	39	3.82
Hired party position (in parliament or party organisation)	7	11	24	27	31	3.65
MP	11	12	25	24	29	3.48
Political adviser in cabinet	17	17	21	23	22	3.31
Cabinet minister	13	16	22	28	22	3.16
Junior minister (state secretary)	28	19	17	19	17	2.94
Mayor	22	23	28	13	14	2.76
Prime minister	40	22	18	8	12	2.29

Note: Frequencies and means; $n = 476-8$.

(HPI) (Hogan, 1986), which is a measure of normal everyday personality. Ambitious people are said to be competitive, achievement oriented, confident and upwardly mobile (Jones et al, 2017: 26). Some see ambition as a sub-dimension of extraversion, one of the Big Five personality traits (Hogan and Holland, 2003). However, the HPI is said to capture ambitious personality traits more effectively than the Big Five personality traits (Jones et al, 2017). The HPI provides detailed information regarding characteristics that facilitate a person’s ability to get along with others and achieve their professional, educational and personal goals. This study only included the six HPI questions relating to ambition – the degree to which a person appears competitive, self-confident, determined, leader-like, achievement oriented and socially confident (for exact wording of items, see Table A2 in the Supplementary Online Appendix). Based on these six questions, an ambitious personality index was constructed and used as an independent variable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .70$). Politicised upbringing was measured through a direct question in the survey that asked whether the respondents’ parents had been members of a political party; one dummy was constructed (none versus mother/father/both). The multivariate analysis also included age and party as controls (both measured through direct questions in the survey). For the party variable, the research team constructed a set of dummies (for descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables, see Tables A3 and A4 in the Supplementary Online Appendix).

With data from individuals (level 1) nested within parties (level 2), a multi-level model was used for analysis. Since the number of clusters is small, restricted maximum likelihood (REML) with Kenward-Roger correction was used to reduce the underestimation of fixed-effect standard errors. Given the relatively large number of lower-level units and the small number of higher-level units, the party variables (contextual level) cannot be included simultaneously. To control for party, a selection procedure was applied (Billiet et al, 2014). Each of the party dummies was introduced in a model including all individual-level variables; the party dummy was then removed before a new party dummy was introduced. Only the contextual variables with significant effects were then introduced into the final model. In the analyses, interaction terms are also included (Gender*HPI, Gender*Upbringing) when significant. Here, of special interest is the interaction between gender and HPI to determine if our measure of ambitious personality might be gendered, as former

research has revealed that ‘masculine’ personality traits (such as ‘competitive’, ‘does not give up easily’ or ‘self-confident’) can predict differences in recruitment to elected office (Oliver and Conroy, 2018).

Results

The team started the data analysis by running empty baseline models without explanatory variables. The models for the different positions suggest strong reasons to conduct multi-level analyses (see the intra-class correlation coefficient for all positions in Table A5 in the Supplementary Online Appendix).

To investigate whether male youth politicians have stronger ambitions for elected positions than do women (H1), the analysis begins with the top elected political positions: prime minister, cabinet minister and MP (see Table 2). As Table 2 shows, gender has a clear, negative effect on ambitions to become prime minister (see model A). This effect also holds when contextual variables are introduced: there is no effect of party (not reported). There is a significant interaction effect

Table 2: Top elected positions, unstandardised parameter estimates with standard errors

	Prime Minister		Cabinet minister		Member of Parliament
Fixed effects	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E
Gender	-.423*** (.128)	-.677*** (.179)	-.305* (.129)	-.316* (.129)	-.244* (.123)
HPI (ambitious personality index)	.036** (.012)	.036** (.012)	.050*** (.012)	.049*** (.012)	.037*** (.011)
Upbringing	-.205 (.125)	-.458** (.177)	-.239 (.127)	-.245 (.126)	-.137 (.121)
Age	-.056** (.021)	-.057** (.021)	-.030 (.022)	-.032 (.022)	-.030 (.021)
Red Party				-.748* (.328)	
Gender* Upbringing		.501* (.248)			
Constant	2.790*** (.573)	2.941*** (.575)	2.711*** (.589)	2.847*** (.589)	3.299*** (.557)
Random effects					
Level 2: var. party intercept	.024 (.033)	.019 (.030)	.085 (.065)	.043 (.044)	.041 (.039)
Level 1: residual variance	1.713*** (.116)	1.704*** (.116)	1.738*** (.118)	1.737*** (.118)	1.593*** (.108)
AIC	1537.090	1533.985	1548.865	1544.716	1503.906
BIC	1545.277	1542.167	1557.052	1552.898	1512.088
-2 restricted log-likelihood	1533.090	1529.985	1544.865	1540.716	1499.906

Notes. Estimates are retrieved using REML with Kenward-Roger correction. Reference categories are: gender = male; (HPI) ambition index = low ambitions (1); upbringing = no parents active; hours = 0; age = 13; party = all other parties. $n_{\text{individuals}} = 336$; $n_{\text{parties}} = 9$. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Table 3: Local elected positions, unstandardised parameter estimates with standard errors

	Mayor	Local councillor
Fixed effects		
Gender	-.506*** (.123)	-.295** (.114)
HPI (ambitious personality index)	.027* (.011)	.016 (.011)
Upbringing	-.103 (.121)	-.040 (.112)
Age	-.013 (.021)	.007 (.019)
Constant	2.586*** (.562)	3.347*** (.532)
Random effects		
Level 2: var. party intercept	.085 (.062)	.139 (.087)
Level 1: residual variance	1.575*** (.107)	1.364*** (.093)
AIC	1505.700	1446.056
BIC	1513.887	1454.243
-2 restricted log-likelihood	1501.700	1442.056

Notes. Estimates are retrieved using REML with Kenward-Roger correction. The reference categories are: gender = male; HPI (ambitious personality index) = low ambitions (1); upbringing = no parents active; hours = 0; age = 13; party = all other parties. $n_{\text{individuals}} = 336$; $n_{\text{parties}} = 9$. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

(Gender*Upbringing), suggesting that socialisation processes affect women and men differently when it comes to the desire to gain the ultimate position in a parliamentary democracy (see model B).

For the cabinet minister ambition, there is also a negative effect of gender (see model C). This effect holds when contextual variables are included. There is a strong negative effect of the party variable (see model D). Respondents from the Red Party clearly have lower ambitions to become cabinet ministers. For MP ambition, there is also a significant effect of gender (see model E). Here, no contextual variables or interactions are significant.

Turning to elected positions at the local level, as Table 3 shows, gender has a clear negative effect on ambitions to become a mayor. A negative effect of gender was also observed for the local councillor ambition. Contextual variables or interactions are not significant. Overall, gender has a negative effect on all elected positions, but there seems to be a difference within the elected positions, as the effect of gender is strongest for PM and mayor, and somewhat weaker for MP and local councillor.

To investigate whether there is a gender gap in appointed positions (H2), the analysis now turns to the desire to become a state secretary, to become a political adviser or to have a hired party position (see Table 4). For the state secretary ambition, there is a significant negative effect of gender. Conversely, there are no effects of gender on political advisor or hired party position ambitions. In the three models explaining appointed positions, no contextual variables or interactions are significant.

The data in Tables 2, 3 and 4 show that youth politicians with an ambitious personality have stronger ambitions for both elected and appointed positions. The effect of the ambitious personality index (HPI) is positive for all positions bar local councillor. It should be noted, however, that the effect is relatively weak. There is an interaction effect (Gender*HPI) on the ambition for hired party positions, but the significance level (sign. = .109) is above the selected threshold (.050).

Table 4: Appointed positions, unstandardised parameter estimates with standard errors

	State secretary	Political adviser	Hired party position
Fixed effects			
Gender	-.297* (.122)	-.058 (.121)	.008 (.116)
HPI (ambitious personality index)	.025* (.011)	.023* (.011)	.027* (.011)
Upbringing	-.040 (.121)	.079 (.119)	-.048 (.114)
Age	.039 (.021)	.025 (.020)	-.022 (.019)
Constant	1.650** (.574)	2.155*** (.566)	3.673*** (.611)
Random effects			
Level 2: var. party intercept	.202 (.120)	.181 (.108)	.046 (.038)
Level 1: residual variance	1.563*** (.106)	1.528*** (.104)	1.416*** (.096)
AIC	1504.626	1497.269	1449.784
BIC	1512.809	1505.456	1457.962
-2 restricted log-likelihood	1500.626	1493.269	1445.784

Notes. Estimates are retrieved using REML with Kenward-Roger correction. The reference categories are: gender = male; HPI (ambitions index) = low ambitions (1); upbringing = no parents active; hours = 0; age = 13; party = all other parties. $n_{\text{individuals}} = 336$; $n_{\text{parties}} = 9$. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Few clear effects of politicised upbringing were observed. There is a negative effect of upbringing on the ambition to become prime minister (sign. = .103) and cabinet minister (sign. = .060), but the significance levels are above the selected threshold (.050) and are therefore not reported in Table 2. As noted earlier, there is also a significant interaction effect (Gender*Upbringing) on prime minister ambition.

For the controls, it is worth mentioning that age has a negative effect on ambitions to be prime minister. In other words, the older youth politicians are, the more realistic they are about the difficulties of reaching the top position in parliamentary systems. Given the nature of the data (individuals nested within parties), party was introduced as a control in the multi-level model using a selection procedure. In particular, the analysis shows that respondents from the Red Party are clearly less interested in becoming cabinet ministers (see model D in Table 2). There are also negative effects of the Red Party on the ambitions for becoming an MP (sign. = .099), local councillor (sign. = .068) and state secretary (sign. = .102), but the significance levels are above the selected threshold (.050), and the effects are therefore not reported in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Discussion of findings

A vast body of literature has foregrounded the existence of a gender gap in political (progressive) ambitions, and academics are now increasingly investigating how individual and contextual factors can explain these gaps (Piscopo and Kenny, 2020). Nevertheless, empirical knowledge is lacking around how gender can affect ambitions for different political positions. In response, this article has investigated the political ambitions of youth politicians and tested how gender affects ambitions for elected and appointed positions. The analysis revealed a clear effect of gender on ambitions for elected positions.

All else being equal, the sampled men are more inclined to desire a future elected position, such as prime minister, cabinet minister, MP, mayor or local councillor. The results therefore seem to support the hypothesis that male youth politicians will have stronger ambitions for elected positions than female youth politicians (H1). Conversely, no significant effects of gender were observed for two of the appointed positions (political adviser and hired party position). The hypothesis that female youth politicians will have stronger ambitions for appointed positions than male youth politicians (H2) is therefore not supported. In other words, men and women alike foresee a future as political advisors in government or having a paid party position in parliament or the party organisation.

However, there is also a negative effect of gender on the state secretary ambition (actor appointed by the government), and the effect of gender seems to vary across the different elected positions (strongest for prime minister and mayor). Rather than a question of men preferring elected political positions and women preferring appointed political positions, a prominence effect may therefore also be in play: the more visible the job is, the less likely women are to want to hold it; and the more in the background the responsibility, the less likely men are to want to hold it.

Furthermore, this study examined how personality traits can explain variations in political ambitions for both elected and hired positions (H3). Drawing on the Big Five personality traits, recent studies have shown how the gender gap in nascent political ambition is robust to the inclusion of measures of personality (Allen and Cutts, 2020). The present study has drawn on the HPI (Hogan, 1986) to investigate if respondents who are competitive, self-confident, determined, leader-like, achievement oriented and socially confident also aim for higher political positions. These traits, in combination, were termed an ‘ambitious personality index’. In this research, an ambitious personality has an independent effect on ambitions for almost all political positions (elected and appointed). Therefore, H3 was supported. The results here supplement the findings of Oliver and Conroy (2018), suggesting that certain ‘masculine’ personality traits – like competitiveness and self-confidence – can explain differences in recruitment to elected office. However, the fact that interaction terms (Gender*HPI) were not significant for any of the eight positions investigated in this study suggests that the HPI measurement of an ambitious personality may be less gendered than one might think.

The hypothesis on upbringing (H4) was not strongly supported. However, the negative, though not significant, effect on ambition to become prime minister or cabinet minister suggests that youth politicians with parents in political parties may be less interested in these top positions in executive government.

The multi-level analysis revealed that party characteristics may affect political ambitions: respondents from the far-left party were noticeably less interested in becoming cabinet ministers. This would suggest that both individual and contextual factors are in play (Piscopo and Kenny, 2020).

Any research of this type is not without its limitations. This article is based on a study of Norwegian youth party elites. Although they are not (yet) fully fledged politicians, youth party elites are more than students and ordinary party members. As leading youth politicians (in local, regional or central branches), they have already shown a clear interest in politics. Thus, there is a certain element of self-selection at work here, and young politicians would be expected to espouse stronger political career ambitions than students or rank-and-file members. They should not therefore

be considered representative of citizens or of (youth) party members in general. On the other hand, there are no strong traditions of openly stating political ambitions in countries where the parties are more robust than the individual politicians. As [Bruter and Harrison \(2009a: 20\)](#) have noted, ‘a dominant social norm about not promoting oneself’ may have a role to play. As sober North Europeans, for instance, the youth party elites under investigation may have been less inclined to reveal their inner political ambitions.

Despite these limitations, some important implications are still of relevance to a wider audience. First, the results contribute to the literature that explores gender gaps in political ambitions. For individuals interested in influencing policy, positions as paid staffers, consultants or advisers represent alternative political career paths ([Allen and Cairney, 2017](#); [Karlsen and Saglie, 2017](#)). The results here suggest that men have stronger ambitions to reach elected political positions, while few gender differences are apparent for appointed political positions. The focus on both elected and appointed political positions to understand why some gender gaps persist and some close represents an important supplement to the existing literature. The results are in line with previous research which has determined that more women are party employees than party members and MPs ([Webb and Fisher, 2003: 14](#)). [Tafaga and Kerby \(2020\)](#) have pointed to a similarly gendered division of labour among Australian politically appointed staff members, with men occupying high-status roles and women overwhelmingly serving in support roles. Likewise, in advising positions in Canada’s House of Commons, [Snagovsky and Kerby \(2019\)](#) have found that men dominate legislative roles, while women dominate administrative roles. These gendered differences do not necessarily stem from contrasting commitments or work–life balance issues between men and women ([Fox and Lawless, 2014](#); [Coffé and Davidson-Schmich, 2020](#)), as both career paths can be time-consuming, nor do they only stem from the fact that women tend to be more competition-averse ([Kanthak and Woon, 2015](#)). Rather, women may be less eager to pursue certain top positions in politics because some are more visible – and therefore exposed to threats or harassment – compared to less visible elected positions or appointed positions in government, the party or parliament ([Bauer and Darkwah, 2020](#); [Krook and Sanín, 2020](#)). It is not within the scope of this study to couple political ambitions with information about perceived or actual threats. However, future research should elaborate on how men and women may desire different career paths based on gendered differences in public exposure.

Second, the results speak to the literature that aims to attribute political ambitions to individual personality traits. In previous research, increasing emphasis has been placed on ‘dark’ traits, such as the willingness to lie and manipulate to achieve personal gains (Machiavellianism), as well as the rejection of criticism and an exaggerated sense of self-worth (narcissism) ([Peterson and Palmer, 2019](#)), while political ambition has been found to be most consistently related to lower levels of honesty and humility ([Blais et al, 2019: 763](#)). Several studies have determined that Machiavellianism and narcissism increase a person’s probability of having thought about running for office and feeling qualified to do so ([Pruysers and Blais, 2017; 2019](#)). Such findings have led [Peterson and Palmer \(2019: 2\)](#) to conclude that ‘conflict and manipulation are part and parcel with politics’, and that politics is, at times, ‘a dark place with manipulation, calculation, and conflict inherent in the activity’. However, political

ambitions cannot solely be explained through reference to dark or ‘socially malevolent’ personality traits (Aichholzer and Willmann, 2020: 8). Studies elsewhere have found that ‘positive’ attributes – such as extraversion and a greater degree of openness to experiences – correlate with political career ambitions (Pruysers and Blais, 2019; Allen and Cutts, 2020). The results here show that normal, day-to-day personality traits are also important. To emphasise more the role of personality therefore seems imperative to explain gendered dynamics of ambition. Enjoying speaking in front of people and taking the lead in groups are both crucial attributes in the desire to become a top politician. Modern politics is replete with painful compromises and difficult policy defeats, so politicians must also possess self-confidence, the ability to know what they want and the resilience to try again if they fail. The focus on such brighter sides of personality represents an important addition to the existing scholarship. These light personality traits may be equally important in understanding the key motivators of political ambitions – in Northern Europe and Scandinavia, at least. In turn, this echoes the argument made by Florczak et al (2020: 6), who state that ‘narcissism may be more detrimental to a candidacy in Denmark than it appears to have been in recent American national politics’. This study has not compared dark and light personality traits, but future research should look further into how these different aspects may explain political ambitions.

Note

¹ Tables A1–A5 can be found in the Supplementary Online Appendix, available at Figshare: <https://figshare.com/s/4012d2800d69687f621>

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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