**From Nonprofit Leader to Elected Official:**

**Examining Political Ambition in the Nonprofit Sector**

**Abstract**

To what extent do leaders of nonprofit organizations run for elected office? We address this question through an exploratory study using survey data from a random sample of 184 leaders of nonprofit human service organizations in the US. Drawing upon theories of political ambition, we explore the factors that may shape nascent political ambition (propensity to run) as well as expressive political ambition (running for office). We find that nonprofit leaders are no more likely to run for office than the average citizen, but *interest in running* is much more common. We identify several individual-level and professional socialization factors associated with political ambition. Our study makes an important theoretical contribution by outlining a model of political ambition for the nonprofit sector that can be tested in future studies, and makes an important practical contribution by highlighting ways that associations and nonprofit industry groups might convert nascent ambition into expressive ambition.

**Introduction**

Many studies have explored the question of why people run for elected office. Little work however has examined specific groups of the population that might have an increased propensity to run for office. Often working in government-funded organizations and delivering services within a specific social policy community, leaders of nonprofit organizations may represent one such group with heightened political ambition. Nonprofits have a long history of engaging in political activity in an effort to influence policies that are relevant to the communities and clients they serve. As such, nonprofits’ issue advocacy been widely studied, providing insights into the determinants of advocacy (Berry & Arons, 2003; LeRoux and Goerdel, 2009), tactics and strategies employed by nonprofit leaders in their advocacy (Mosley, 2012; Guo and Saxton, 2013), and factors that promote advocacy effectiveness (Nicholson-Crotty, 2007; Johansen and LeRoux, 2013).

While this research has been useful in illuminating various aspects of nonprofits’ roles as policy advocates, it has obscured consideration of other ways nonprofit leaders might pursue policy goals or political change. Specifically, researchers have overlooked the question of whether and to what extent nonprofit leaders might be inclined to run for elected office.

As the nonprofit sector has grown and its economic impact expands, a growing interest has emerged among nonprofit industry groups to identify and support nonprofit leaders who wish to run for elected office. The creation of the 501(c)(4) organization “CForward” and its associated Political Action Committee (PAC) in 2011 for example, signaled the first large-scale, coordinated effort to identify, financially support, and endorse nonprofit leaders as candidates for political office in local, state, and national races across the U.S. (Rosenthal, 2012). CForward’s objective was to support and promote candidates, regardless of party, that “worked for a nonprofit, served on a nonprofit board, and, at a minimum, included mentions of nonprofits in their campaign materials” (Cohen 2012). During the 2012 election cycle, CForward financially supported and promoted eight such candidates, all from different states, representing the interests of the nonprofit sector in their bids for various elected offices ranging from Congressional representative seats, state legislative seats, and city council seats. One example included the Executive Director of the Michigan Nonprofit Association, who ran a successful campaign in 2012 for a Michigan House of Representatives seat with support and backing of CForward (Cohen, 2012).

While public charities are limited in their political roles by prohibitions on partisanship, there are ample opportunities for nonprofit leaders acting in the capacity of private citizens to run for elected office. While only a very small percentage of citizens – 2% - will ever pursue elected office (Motel, 2014), nonprofit leaders may have an increased propensity for running, given their embeddedness within policy networks and the fact they are often recognized as civic leaders within their communities. Yet, there has been no systematic study of this issue. Using data from a national survey of nonprofit social service directors, this study addresses the following questions: Are nonprofit leaders more likely to run for office than those in the general public? To what extent have nonprofit leaders considered running? What proportion have followed through with a campaign for public office? Among nonprofit leaders, what are the factors associated with the decision to run for office? The analysis draws upon political ambition theory and evidence from the political science literature to develop theoretical models of electoral office-seeking by nonprofit leaders. While data limitations preclude fully testing these models, we identify correlates of political ambition, and outline a model that can be tested in future studies.

In the next section, we examine political ambition theory and review the literature on this topic. Next, we describe our data and methodological approach, and present our findings. We conclude by highlighting the limitations of our study, outlining some directions for future research, and discussing practical considerations for nonprofit leaders interesting in seeking office, and identify ways that associations and other groups might support their endeavors.

**Who Runs for Office and Why?**

From contacting officials and joining advocacy groups to volunteering and voting, there are numerous opportunities to participate in civic and political life in the U.S. However, running for public office is the ultimate act of political participation as it, “signals an individuals’ willingness to put himself or herself before the voters and vie to become a member of an elected body,” (Lawless, 2012, p 60). Yet even the most motivated candidates may determine that the risks of running outweigh the rewards. After all, candidacy at any level requires individuals to open themselves up to, “potential examination, scrutiny, loss of privacy, possible rejection and disruption from regular routines and pursuits. It involves mulling over how to raise (sometimes exorbitant) sums of money, navigate the media and strike unappealing compromises,” (Lawless, 2012, p. 3). In light of this, how can we explain an individuals’ decision to run for office? We draw from theoretical and empirical literature on political ambition to identity factors that might explain nonprofit executive directors’ shift from organizational mission-focused leaders to candidates seeking public office.

Political ambition can be defined as a desire to gain and retain political power through electoral means (Lawless, 2012). This ambition has been characterized as both nascent and expressive, with the former signifying a person’s initial interest in candidacy and the latter denoting whether or not an individual actually chooses to run for office (Fox and Lawless, 2005; Lawless, 2012). There are many theories about political ambition (Lasswell, 1948; Lawless, 2012; Schlesinger, 1966). Schlesinger’s (1966) rational choice paradigm, views the behavior of politicians as a response to his or her office goals, and these goals are shaped largely by the political context that he/she operates within. This rational choice framework, “conceptualizes political ambition as primarily a strategic response to a political opportunity structure,” (Fox and Lawless, 2005, p 644). Opportunity structures might include factors such as campaign costs, the size of the jurisdiction, the number of offices available, partisan makeup of the environment, term-limit requirements, level of competition, and party congruence with constituents (Fox and Lawless, 2005). From the rational choice perspective, the structure of the political system shapes ambition because it creates barriers that allow only certain types to advance through it (Black, 1972). While research centered on the relationship between opportunity structure and political ambition has produced a wealth of knowledge, much of it has proceeded without accounting for earlier work that highlighted the importance of personal attributes and motivations that are linked to political ambition.

In 1948 Harold Lasswell introduced the idea that there are characteristics inherent in political office holders, which he termed the “political-type”. “The conception of the political type is that some personalities are power seekers, searching out the power institutions of society into which they are born and devoting themselves to the capture and use of government,” (Laswell, 1948, p. 20). Extending Lasswell’s theory, Browning (1968) concluded that office seekers tend not only to emphasize power, but also ambition. As such, individuals may gravitate toward political life in order to promote themselves or their activities or to climb the proverbial ladder and advance through their political career. The picture painted by these early theorists is that there are many individual level factors, independent of larger opportunity structures that shape a person’s political ambition. Political scientists interested in the influence of individual level traits on both nascent and expressive ambition have extended this early work and identified many important factors thought to shape political ambition ranging from issue passion and political ideology to socialization processes, stages in life and demographic traits (Fox and Lawless, 2005; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995).

*Issue Passion and Ideology*

One of the primary factors thought to bolster an individual’s propensity to participate politically is issue passion (Lawless, 2012). In fact, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) find that when individuals have a personal stake in government policy or care deeply about political issues, they are more likely to participate in the political process. Even citizens who lack the time, money and civic skills that foster political activism are more likely to participate when they are concerned about or directly affected by a particular policy. Among public assistance recipients, for example, “severe economic hardship […] bolsters the willingness to participate in the political system,” (Lawless and Fox, 2001, p. 362). Further, Canon (1990) finds that congressional actors with no prior experience are driven in part by their desire to pursue policy goals. In addition to specific policy goals and issue passion, an individuals’ political ambition may also be shaped by a desire to attend to local problems, dissatisfaction with current elected officials and the political environment more broadly, or feelings of obligation to pursue ones’ personal values (Prewitt et al., 1966). Similarly, other motivations may shape the decision to run including a desire to increase representation, or a desire to challenge an incumbent whose positions on issues do not align with that of the prospective candidate.

The main institution around which personal values and ideology are structured is the political party and the degree to which an individual identifies as either a liberal or conservative (Verba and Nie, 1972). Thomsen (2014) suggests “a party’s reputation conveys information about the types of candidate that belongs in the party and […] potential candidates draw on this reputation to determine if they can achieve their electoral and policy goals and to decide whether to run for office,” (p. 786). While Thomsen (2014) finds that moderate liberals and conservatives are less likely to run for office in today’s partisan climate than those holding more extreme ideological views, she also notes the important possibility that potential candidates who are ideological outliers or too extreme in their views may also be dissuaded. Conversely, Lawless (2012) does not see the hyper-partisan climate affecting liberals and conservatives differently but rather finds that it breeds cynicism and therefore likely discourages all potential candidates from engaging the political system. While there is conflicting evidence linking personal ideology to political ambition, its theoretical importance is clear. Further, Browning (1968) finds that the choice of partisan politics as the arena for the expression of individual values to be the result of intense socialization in both childhood and adulthood.

*Socialization Processes*

The set of life experiences that leads an individual to enter into the political world is often referred to as political socialization (Prewitt, Eulau and Zisk, 1966). More generally, according to Soule (1969) the series of questions: “What is taught? To whom? By whom? How? Under what conditions? With what consequences?” best sums up the topic (p. 444). Studies of both potential candidates and office holders have shown that an inherited interest in politics resultant from socialization processes is a more important predictor of ones’ decision to enter office than other indicators such as personality (Fox and Lawless, 2005). It has long been hypothesized that an inherited interest in politics and the political realm was primarily formed as a result of childhood experiences. For example, growing up with highly political parents or having intimate connections with politics through school elections, influential teachers or role models, religious institutions or political associations has been thought to provide children with motivational tendencies that may propel them into politics later in life (Fox and Lawless, 2005; Prewitt et al, 1966). While socialization processes in childhood are associated with political interest in adulthood, certain socialization processes in adulthood may foster an interest in electoral candidacy (Prewitt et al., 1966).

In adulthood, proximity to policy issues, as well as politically-oriented social and professional groups can cultivate political ambition and instilling within members qualifications and a sense of efficacy in ones’ ability to run for political office. For example, individuals who work or volunteer for campaigns, are members of professional associations with policy agendas, or interact regularly with elected officials might be more likely to envision themselves as elected officials (Prewitt, 1965). Such was the case for one California city councilman interviewed by Prewitt (1965) who stated that, “it is only a short step from service clubs or civic groups to elected office,” (p. 108). Lawless (2012), found that greater access to the political arena fosters political ambition among potential candidates, concluding that “political proximity may both demystify the political process and foster relationships with politicians and community leaders and donors who could be helpful throughout the candidate emergence process,” (p. 114). While politically-oriented social and professional groups can bolster political ambitions, certain occupations and organizations may also have this effect.

According to an analysis of congressional office-holders, those with prior careers as political activists were the most interested in entering the electoral arena and reported the highest levels of self-efficacy than those from other career paths (Lawless, 2012). For example, one executive director of a statewide organization focused on children’s issues reported that, “running an organization is probably not terribly different from sitting on a city council or even in the state legislature,” (Lawless, 2012, page 120). Those working in nonprofits more heavily funded by government may develop political ambition over time given their exposure to elected and administrative public officials, and the policy-making process. Membership in a state nonprofit association or other industry group that represents the interests of nonprofit organizations may similarly influence a decision by a nonprofit executive to run, as these organizations not only represent the collective political interests of their members, they also encourage policy advocacy and activism among their member organizations (Balassiano and Chandler, 2010).

Disciplines represent another socialization factor that may influence political ambition among nonprofit leaders. Neo-institutional theorists emphasize the influence of “non-local” environments such as “organizational sectors or fields roughly coterminous with the boundaries of industries, professions, or national societies” (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, p 13). Disciplines, and the networks associated with them thus provide an important mechanism for the diffusion of information and for the instillation of common norms, values, heuristics, and practices. For example, advocacy, political action, and a commitment to social justice are commonly-shared values of the Social Work discipline, and incorporated into the profession’s code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers NASW, 2005). Indeed, so firmly embedded is the professional value of political action within the social work field that the national professional association, NASW operates its own political arm/PAC known as Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) to endorse and financially support campaigns of candidates for US House and Senate seats whose platforms align with NASW’s policy agenda. Many state chapters of NASW operate similar PAC’s to support candidates for state and local elected offices who have ties to the social work field and/or whose candidacy reflects the interest of the NASW. Historically, nonprofit social service leaders were trained as social workers, but it has become increasingly common for nonprofits to be led by persons trained in business management, as well as a variety of other disciplines such as public administration, which emphasizes neutral competence, managerialism, and distance from electoral politics. While issue passion, ideology and professional/sector socialization influences might help to shape political ambition, a more complete perspective would also account for demographic characteristics.

*Demographic Characteristics*

*Sex*

In 2015, approximately 80% of all U.S. congress persons, 88% of all state governors, and 81% of all mayors with city populations over 30,000 were men (CAWP, 2016). This means fewer than 20% of women serve as U.S. senators or representatives, state governors or city mayors. These numbers suggest that sex differences exist in electoral politics despite evidence that women running for public office often fare as well as their male colleagues (Fox, Lawless and Feeley, 2001). Evidence suggests no bias against women candidates in terms of fundraising and vote totals, the two most important factors in electoral success (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley, 2001). Scholars have drawn upon both political ambition theory and gender socialization to explain why the number of women candidates and office-holders remains low.

Theories of political ambition contend that on average women express less desire for political self-enhancement and the power, profit and prestige that often accompany elected positions, than do men. Bledsoe and Herring (1990) find that male city council members are more likely than their female counterparts to be motivated by political ambition. Similarly, in a study of congressional candidates Fox (1997) found that men were more likely to run for office simply out of a desire to hold office, while women were more likely to run because they were motivated by a specific policy issue. Fox and Lawless contend that men are more likely to be encouraged to run for office, and women are less likely than men to view themselves as qualified to run. In fact, research findings indicate that political recruitment efforts often strongly favor men over women (Fox and Lawless, 2010) and on average men are much more likely than women to consider themselves qualified to run for office (Fox and Lawless, 2005).

Gender socialization theory has also been used to explain the sex differences that persist in electoral politics. Conover and Gray (1983) define sex role socialization as the, “division of activities into the public extra-familial jobs done by the male and the private intra-familial ones performed by the female,” (p. 2). Even for women that enter into extra-familial careers, childrearing and household demands remain greater for women than men. Lawless (2012) suggests that these factors in conjunction with masculinized public and private institutional settings, convey to women that political office is an inappropriate and ill-fitting role for them, which in turn depresses their desire to run for office.

*Race*

The 114th congress (January 2015 – January 2017) is the most diverse ever, yet non-whites make up 38% of the U.S. population and still fill only 17% of elected positions (Krogstad, 2015). While numerous studies have examined the relationships between gender and the decision to run for office, according to Lawless (2012), “almost no research specifically addresses race or ethnicity in the candidate emergence process at all,” (p. 59). Further, the literature that does address relationships between political activism and race has produced conflicting hypotheses (Lawless, 2012). On one hand, strong group identification can encourage political activism (Fox and Lawless, 2005). However, research also shows that identification with a particular racial group is associated with disconnectedness from social and political systems (Hochschild, 1995), which can result in lower rates of participation (Lawless, 2012). Despite these conflicting hypotheses Lawless (2012) finds that African Americans are significantly more likely than Whites and Latinos to seriously consider running for office. Moreover, race may combine with personal motivations. Persons of color may be motivated to run to bring representation to the interests of their racial or ethnic group.

*Age*

An individual’s stage in life is also believed a factor in political participation, particularly with regard to entering political races (Fox and Lawless, 2005). Individuals such as executive directors who have reached the top of the ladder in their profession, may be more ambitious overall and more likely to contemplate acquiring a position of power (Hain, 1974). While we might expect individuals to pursue elected office once they are further along in their careers, we might also expect that once a certain age is reached, the inclination for seeking office declines. For example, Hain (1974) found that propensity of first-time office-seeking peaks between the ages of 41-45, and begins to taper off in the years after.

It is important to consider an individual’s age from an issue perspective as well. For many nonprofit workers, the attraction to the sector is based on passion for a particular issue (Kim and Lee, 2007). Thus, their passions and identities are often tightly coupled with social causes and issues. Evidence suggests that the ability to impact causes they care about are strong motivators for nonprofit employees to remain in their job, even for long periods of time despite dissatisfaction with pay and career advancement (Kim and Lee, 2007). Clearly the issue passion that drives many to enter and stay in the nonprofit sector may also motivate entry into political candidacy in order to champion their cause.

We draw upon these insights from political ambition theory and existing literature on running for elected office to highlight a set of variables that may linked to nascent and expressive political ambition within a specific subset of the population – nonprofit Executive Directors.

**Data and Methods**

The data for this project were collected through a web-based survey administered in the fall of 2012 to a random sample of Executive Directors of nonprofit human organizations having a primary mission relating to mental health, senior services, workforce development, and family planning, and immigrant services. The study had multiple purposes, one of which was to better understand the level of interest among nonprofit leaders in running for office (nascent ambition), as well at the characteristics and motives of nonprofit leaders who actually run for elected office (expressive ambition). Standard survey research procedures were used as a guideline for administering the online survey (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). The political ambition module of the survey was administered to 523 Executive Directors/CEOs, of which 181 responded, yielding a final response rate of 34.6%.[[1]](#endnote-1) This is consistent with response rates of other survey-based nonprofit studies (Jaskyte, 2004; Guo and Acar, 2005). All organizations have 501(c)(3) status and budgets of $100,000 and above.

This analysis examines factors associated with nascent and expressive ambition among nonprofit executive directors. Given our small sample size, we limit our analysis to bivariate correlations and a penalized regression model that accounts only for various personal motivations that help to explain interest in running. Firth logit, also known as penalized likelihood estimation, is a regression method designed for rare events analysis, and corrects for the biased parameter estimates that might otherwise occur when a binary dependent variable has fewer events than zeros or “non-events” (King and Zeng, 2001; Firth, 1993).

Table 1 provides a detailed description of the measurement for each variable in our analysis, including the key variables of interest, nascent and expressive ambition, as well as the variables we expect to be associated with political ambition based on the preceding literature review. Descriptive statistics for each measure are reported in the table.

[TABLE 1]

Variables that we expect to be correlated with nascent and political ambition are grouped into three categories of factors: personal motivations, socialization, and demographic characteristics. The variables associated with these categories are summarized here along with their predicted effect on both propensity to run for office, and running for office: *Personal motivation* includes ideological intensity (liberal or conservative (+), desire to bring one’s own values into public office (+), desire to acquire more resources for one’s organization (+), desire to challenge elected officials who are detrimental to one’s organization (+), and desire to champion a particular cause or policy issue (+). Measures of *socialization* includes whether the respondent’s organization is a member of a nonprofit association (+), and proportion of organization’s total funding that comes from government (+), and whether respondent has a Social Work degree (+); *demographics* include sex (male/+), race (white/+), and age (+).

**Results**

How prevalent is political ambition among nonprofit leaders? The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal that 15% of nonprofit leaders hold nascent political ambition, having considered running for elected office at either local, state or national level. Table 1 further reveals that the percentage of nonprofit leaders that have actually run a campaign for public office is quite small (3%). Given evidence that only 2% of the general population will ever run for elected office, we can conclude nonprofit leaders are no more likely to run than the average citizen (Motel, 2014). Examples of the offices our respondents ran for included US Congress, state representative, city council member, county commissioner, and township assessor. Who are the nonprofit leaders that run for office and who are those that hold an interest in running? Table 2 presents some additional descriptive information on those who report nascent political ambition and those who actually ran for elected office.

[Table 2]

Twenty eight persons in our sample reported considering a run for office, but only 6 nonprofit leaders actually ran for office. The data reveal that men are slightly less likely than women to hold nascent ambition (46%), but have higher rates of expressive ambition, as 67% of those who ran for office were men. Nonprofit leaders who hold political ambition are far more likely to be white, as only 25% of those in our sample who reported nascent ambition were Black or Latino, and only 33% of those who ran were of these groups. Among those in our sample who considered running, 67% identified themselves as belonging somewhere on the liberal ideology scale (slightly to extremely), while 14% of those who considered running identified as belong somewhere on the conservative ideology scale. Just over a third (35%) of those who hold nascent ambition have a degree in Social Work, and half (50%) of those who considered running came from an organization that was a member of a nonprofit association. Only a third of those who ran for office worked in a nonprofit that was a member of a nonprofit association. Our data show that nonprofit leaders with political ambition tend to be middle-aged, with the mean age of those who considering a run being 53.6, and 56.2 for those who actually ran for office.

The six nonprofit Executive Directors who ran for office worked in organizations of various sizes and ages, spanning 9 to 84 years, and having budgets ranging from approximately 200,000 to 2.5 million in annual revenues. Those in our sample who ran for office had worked in nonprofits that ranged widely in their dependence on government funding (0 to 98%). Nonprofit leaders who choose to run for office may not necessarily work in the most distressed communities, as unemployment ranged from 5 to 20 percent in the communities where these elected officials’/former ED’s nonprofits were located. Three worked for identity-based nonprofits serving Hispanic populations, while the other three worked in healthcare and disability service organizations prior to running for office. Thus, proximity to identity-based nonprofits should be examined more closely in future studies of electoral ambition. In sum, our brief analysis of these six nonprofit Executive Directors who ultimately ran for office suggests no distinct pattern as to types of nonprofits or communities from which they emerge.

The third aim of our study was to identify the factors associated with political ambition, both nascent and expressive. In Table 3 we present Pearson’s R correlations which reveal the motivational, socialization, and demographic factors statistically associated with political ambition.

[Table 3]

We find the factors most highly correlated with nascent ambition, or the interest in running, are personal motivations. The factor most highly correlated with nascent ambition is a desire to bring one’s own personal values into policy-making (r= .79). The desire to challenge an incumbent office holder is also strongly correlated with nascent ambition (r= . 67), as well as desire to champion a specific policy or cause (r=. 60). Other personal motivations positively correlated with nascent ambition include desire to increase representation of one’s own race or ethnicity (r=. 44) and desire to bring more resources to nonprofits (r= .42). We also find a slight but statistically significant correlation between propensity to run and being male (.15). These same personal values are positively correlated with expressive ambition, or running for office, but the correlation coefficients are much smaller, and should be interpreted with caution, given that the “ran” variable consists of only six cases. While we are primarily interested in assessing the factors associated with nascent and expressive ambition, there are some noteworthy correlations between some of the other variables. For example, the personal motivation to challenge an incumbent officeholder is mildly but positively correlated with having a Social Work degree (r= .17) and serving in an organization that is a member of a nonprofit association (r= .13), but negatively correlated with age (r=. -19), suggesting that younger nonprofit leaders may have stronger inclination to challenge existing officeholders. More importantly, these correlations suggest that perhaps sector socialization influences like nonprofit and professional associations could play a role in shaping political ambition, but they may not be doing so in a proactive sense; rather, members of these organizations and groups may be inspired to run only after becoming dissatisfied with the current policy climate created by incumbent office-holders.

While our data do not permit a full test of the factors that might influence running for office by nonprofit leaders, we can treat interest in running as a type of rare event, and model a limited set of predictive factors using firth logit which corrects for bias that would otherwise occur when the number of non-events or zeros in the dependent variable (no interest in running) far exceed the number of events (interest in running). In this case, we have 28 “events”, or instances of interest in running, and we limit our predictor variables to the five personal motivations, giving us a ratio of 5.6 events per variable (EPV). While a general rule of ten EPV exists for binary regression, Vittinghoff and McCulloch (2007) conclude that a 5-9 EPV generally produces reliable estimates when using the penalized likelihood method, and “only a minor degree of extra caution is warranted, in particular for plausible and highly significant associations hypothesized a priori” (p. 717). Table 4 reports the results of the firth logit analysis.

[Table 4]

While the bivariate correlations show a positive association between all of the personal motivations and interest in running for office, the firth logit suggests that only the desire to champion a particular policy or issue and the desire to bring one’s own values into public office are statistically significant predictors of nascent ambition. When nonprofit leaders are motivated by a specific policy issue, the likelihood of considering a run for office increases by 2.59 (p<.01). Additionally, the likelihood of considering a run for office increases by 3.75 when nonprofit leaders express motivation to bring their personal values into public office (p<.01). While this model is limited due to the nature of our data, it points to the relative importance of personal motivations that may shape interest in running for office among nonprofit leaders. Rare events analysis might be useful in future studies of running for office, given the notoriously low percentage of persons who fall into this category.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Leaders of nonprofit service organizations are embedded within policy communities that range from housing to senior services and health care. These organizational leaders must not only oversee service delivery, but also navigate the external policy environment on a daily basis. This study was motivated by the question of whether that ongoing interaction with the political and policy environment may ultimately foster a desire among nonprofit leaders to become part of the legislative bodies creating laws that define that policy environment. This research note provides a useful starting point by articulating a model of progressive ambition for the nonprofit sector that can be tested in future studies. It also points to some ways nascent political ambition among nonprofit leaders might be converted into expressive ambition.

Our findings reveal that fifteen percent of nonprofit leaders have an interest in, or have given thought to running for office but only a very small number will ultimately act upon this interest. With regard to the political ambition theories described earlier, our correlations provide greatest support for theories pertaining to individual-level personality or motivational characteristics. Specifically, we find strong support for Lawless’s (2012) theorizing about the role of personal values and issue passion (desire to champion a specific policy issue). We also find support for Lawless’s theory with regard to expressive ambition, in that motivation to personally replace an incumbent office holder is the strongest correlate of the decision to run. It may be the case that those with nascent ambition are motivated to seek office out of issue passion, or a desire to champion their specific policy issue, but in order for them to act on their interest in running, it requires an overwhelming sense of urgency to challenge an existing office holder who is viewed as detrimental to the leaders’ policy area of interest.

One aspect of ambition theory that did yield the expected results in our analysis is the role of socialization influences. For example, membership in a nonprofit association is not correlated with either interest in running or the decision to run, nor is training in specific disciplines that advocate political activism, such as Social Work. We think this has both theoretical and practical implications. From a practical standpoint, state nonprofit associations and other industry groups representing nonprofit professionals are missing an opportunity to nurture this nascent ambition and encourage nonprofit leaders’ campaigns for public office. Since these associations are important sources of information for nonprofits, disseminating best practices, lobbying on behalf of members in state capitals, and encouraging nonprofits’ political roles by providing toolkits for advocacy and voter mobilization, we expected nonprofit leaders whose organizations were members of these associations might display a greater disposition for running for office. Yet, we found that belonging to such a group has no effect on political ambition. This points to a potentially important role for nonprofit associations, which are well positioned to encourage office-seeking, as well as offer candidate training, provide information on local and state election laws, timelines and candidate filing requirements.

While state associations are generally nonpartisan organizations and thus cannot create PACs or endorse candidates, they are well positioned to expand the pipeline of potential candidates, especially those who are underrepresented in in electoral politics, but over-represented in the nonprofit workforce. Even within the nonprofit sector, where the workforce is 70% female, we find that male nonprofit leaders are slightly more inclined to run. Numerous groups encouraging women to run for office have gained momentum in the wake of the 2016 electionsuch as *She Should Run*, *Women in Politics/Equal Voice*, and *Run For Something*. Both nonprofit associations as well as professional societies could play a role in encouraging more women to run for office by providing training and technical support described earlier, and by establishing linkages with these groups that might aid prospective candidates from the nonprofit sector with financial support and candidate visibility.

Nonprofit leaders who chose to run for office must maintain clear boundaries between their day jobs working for nonpartisan organizations and running their political campaigns outside of work. Associations could provide legal information, and advise on logistics of running a campaign while being employed by a nonpartisan organization. While our study found minimal support for socialization influences, we believe this aspect of political ambition theory to be relevant to nonprofit leaders running for office. One theoretical implication is that there may be other forms, types, and measures of adult socialization aside from those explored here that shape nonprofit leaders decision to run. Perhaps some of these influences include more “non-local” forms of socialization such as social media-driven groups like *She Should Run.* Future studies should seek to identify and test those influences.

Our study is limited. We acknowledge the analysis relies on cross sectional data, and carries the caveats associated with studying phenomena at a single point in time. We also acknowledge that while we have a full probability sample of certain organizational types, the sample is ultimately small. We also lack the data to fully examine the variables that might shape one’s decision to run. While issues of personal timing, and structure of opportunities including whether the seat is competitive or uncontested are identified in the literature as factors likely to shape political ambition, it is difficult to collect adequate data to account for these types of variations among nonprofit leaders. Future studies could focus on a surveying a larger number of respondents, but focusing on campaigns at a single level (campaigns for state legislatures, or campaigns for congressional seats) where degree of competition would be more feasible to capture.

Another direction for future research would be collecting qualitative data through interviews with those who have indicated a propensity to run, and those who have run. An important issue to better understand is the decision to run based on opposition to an incumbent. Interviews might help to reveal the tipping point at which nonprofit leaders feel compelled into candidacy by the actions of a current office holder. For those that hold nascent ambition, interviews would be helpful in discerning why they have not yet run. Perhaps there are specific barriers related to money, time, or information that have prevented this group from seeking office. This type of data would yield useful insights into the barriers experienced by this group, and could help identify what resources might be needed to convert this interest into expressive ambition.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Variable Measures** | | | | |
| **Dependent Variables** | **Obs** | **Mean/**  **Std Dev.** | **Min/**  **Max** | **Description** |
| Interest in Running for Public Office | 181 | .15/.36 | 0/1 | Survey question: “Have you ever run, or considering running, for any elected office yourself (local, state or national)?” 1=Yes, 0=No |
| Ran for Public Office | 181 | .03/.18 | 0/1 | Measure created through public records search which of those reporting propensity to run had actually campaigned for public office. 1=Yes, 0=No |
| **Independent Variables** |  |  |  |  |
| Liberal | 176 | 1.20/1.05 | 0/3 | Survey question adapted from American National Election Survey (ANES) Ideology measure: 0=Moderate, 1=Slightly Liberal, 2=Liberal, 3=Extremely Liberal. Those who are reported as conservative were coded 0 for this measure. |
| Conservative | 176 | .22/.63 | 0/3 | Survey question adapted from American National Election Survey (ANES) Ideology measure: 0=Moderate, 1=Slightly Conservative, 2=Conservative, 3=Extremely Conservative. Those who reported as liberal were coded 0 for this measure. |
| Personal Values | 181 | .13/.33 | 0/1 | Survey question that asked respondents to indicate whether certain motivations played a role in their interest in running for elected office, motivation 1: “To bring my values into public life” 1=Yes, 0=No |
| Resources | 181 | .07/.23 | 0/1 | Survey question that asked respondents to indicate whether certain motivations played a role in their interest in running for elected office, motivation 2: “To bring more resources to organizations like mine” 1=Yes, 0=No |
| Challenge | 181 | .10/.30 | 0/1 | Survey question that asked respondents to indicate whether certain motivations played a role in their interest in running for elected office, motivation 3: “To stop or challenge elected leaders who are detrimental to organizations like mine” 1=Yes, 0=No |
| Policy | 181 | .08/.27 | 0/1 | Survey question that asked respondents to indicate whether certain motivations played a role in their interest in running for elected office, motivation 4: “To champion a particular cause or issue” 1=Yes, 0=No |
| Representation | 181 | .04/.21 | 0/1 | |  | | --- | | Survey question that asked respondents to indicate whether certain motivations played a role in their interest in running for elected office, motivation 5: “To ensure that my race or ethnicity is represented in government” 1=Yes, 0=No | |
| Nonprofit Association Member | 181 | .39/.49 | 0/1 | Survey question asking respondents whether their organization is a member of a nonprofit association (federal, state, or local), 1=Yes, 0=No |
| Social Worker | 181 | .21/.40 | 0/1 | Survey question asking field of the respondents’ highest degree; 1=Social Work, 0=other |
| Government funding | 179 | 45.38/33.36 | 0/100 | Survey question asking respondent to indicate what percentage of organization’s total annual revenues came from government (any level). |
| Minority (Nonwhite) | 181 | .24/.43 | 0/1 | Survey question asking respondents to identify their race. Original question provided for five different categories plus ‘other’ but variable was recoded into minority (nonwhite)/white: 1=Minority, 0=White |
| Sex (Male) | 180 | .36/.48 | 0/1 | Survey question asking respondents whether they are male or female: 1=Male, 0=Female |
| Age | 180 | 57/10.9 | 27/92 | Calculated from survey question asking respondents year of birth |

**Table 2: Nonprofit Leaders With Political Ambition**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Nascent Ambition Expressive Ambition**

**(Interest in Running) (Ran for Office)**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Male 46% 67%

*(n=13) (n=4)*

Minority 25% 33%

*(n=7) (n=2)*

Liberal 67% 50%

*(n=19) (n=3)*

Conservative 14% 17%

*(n=4) (n=1)*

Social Work degree 35% 17%

*(n=10) (n=1)*

Nonprofit Assoc Member 50% 33%

*(n=14) (n=2)*

Mean age 53.6 56.2

Total 28 6

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 3: Factors Correlated with Nascent and Expressive Political Ambition** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Ran | Interest in Running | Liberal | Conserv | Minority | Male | Age | NP Assoc | Govt Fund | Social Work | Values | Resources | Challenge | Policy |
| Propensity | .38\*\* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Liberal | -.03 | .02 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Conservative | -.01 | .01 | -.39\*\* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Minority | .03 | .01 | -.05 | -.02 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Male | .12 | .15\*\* | .00 | .13\* | .03 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Age | -.01 | -.13\* | .69 | .06 | -.23\*\* | .14\* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| NP Assoc | -.02 | .08 | -.07 | .04 | -.08 | .02 | .05 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Govt Funding | -.10 | -.04 | .15\*\* | -.13\* | -.10 | .00 | .09 | .06 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social Work | -.03 | .08 | .10 | .05 | -.12\* | -.05 | .06 | -.01 | .03 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Values | .30\*\* | .79\*\* | .06 | .00 | -.02 | .13\* | -.09 | .07 | -.05 | .08 |  |  |  |  |
| Resources | .32\*\* | .43\*\* | .05 | -.02 | .05 | .03 | -.09 | .06 | -.00 | .10 | .56\*\* |  |  |  |
| Challenge | .36\*\* | .67\*\* | .08 | .01 | .03 | .07 | -.19\*\* | .13\* | -.05 | .17\*\* | .59\*\* | .59\*\* |  |  |
| Policy | .17\*\* | .60\*\* | .06 | .03 | .12\* | .13\* | -.08 | .02 | -.08 | .07 | .51\*\* | .50\*\* | .54\*\* |  |
| Representation | .26\*\* | .44\*\* | .08 | .01 | .25\*\* | .18\*\* | -.08 | -.00 | -.08 | -.06 | .32\*\* | .48\*\* | .39\*\* | .44\*\* |
| p > .05\*\*; p > .10\*  Obs = correlations range from min n=176 to max=181 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Table 4: Influence of Personal Motivations on Nascent Political Ambition**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Odds** |  | **RSE** |  | **Z** |  | | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Personal Values | 3.75 | \*\*\* | .80 |  | 4.65 | . |
| Resources | -1.33 |  | 1.18 |  | -1.13 |  |
| Challenge | .706 |  | 1.00 |  | 0.70 |  |
| Policy | 2.59 | \*\*\* | 1.00 |  | 2.60 |  |
| Representation | 1.78 |  | 1.28 |  | 1.30 |  |
| Constant | -3.01 | \*\*\* | .37 |  | -8.01 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Number of observations = 181  Wald Chi2 (5) = 37.53  Penalized log likelihood= -37.16530  Prob > Chi2 = 0.0000  p > .01\*\*\*; p > .05\*\*; p > .10\* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | |

1. The survey was funded by the *Institute for Policy on Civic Engagement* at UIC. A total of 778 organizations were randomly selected to receive the survey, and the overall project had a response rate of 37% (n=291). Organizations were sampled from the NTEE codes representing mental health centers, senior services, workforce development centers, and family planning centers, immigrant service centers. Response rates were comparable across types. To avoid an excessively long survey, a common core of questions was administered to all subjects, and varying question modules were administered to smaller random samples across the full sample. Approximately two-thirds of the full sample (523 organizations) were randomly selected to receive the “political ambition” module containing the questions about desire and motivations for running for elected office. The data for this analysis comes from this subset of respondents (n=181; 34.6% response). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)