

# The Personality of the Politically Ambitious

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**Abstract** Until recently, political ambition has largely been considered to be a product of the institutional and political environment. We argue that individual personality plays a significant role in nascent political ambition and progressive ambition. Using a nationally representative survey in the United States and a survey of public officials, we find a strong relationship between personality traits and nascent ambition. We find that individuals with higher levels of extraversion and openness are more likely to consider running for office, while agreeable and

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Authors names are alphabetical. Each author had an equal contribution to this paper.

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conscientious individuals are significantly less interested. We also find that personality traits do not relate to progressive ambition in the same way as they do to nascent ambition. In fact, they are weaker predictors of progressive ambition than they are of nascent ambition. We argue that democratic elections and public service attract certain types of individuals to seek office, which has implications for elite behavior and representation.

**Keywords** Political ambition · Personality · Progressive ambition

*Under our system, politicians are not chosen by “the people” or the “bosses” or the media. They are self-selected... Our politicians are different from you and me.*

—Richard Reeves (2011).

## Introduction

Until recently, scholars largely have taken politicians’ political ambition to be an unvarying constant that motivates individuals to seek public office and pursue positions of power. Taking this underlying ambition as constant, scholars have emphasized the structural factors that encourage or limit the pursuit of political office (Abramson et al. 1987; Black 1972; Rohde 1979). Rather than seeking to understand the ambition unique to individuals who choose to run, ambition for political office has been taken as a natural “response to the possibilities that lie before politicians” (Schlesinger 1991, 38).

For the most part, this approach has been driven by how political science analyzes political elite action, which has primarily focused on institutional structures that shape responses. Part of the motivation for the one-sided approach to studying elite behavior has been the difficulty in surveying politicians to measure individual factors that might influence decision making. Yet, just because surveying political elites is difficult does not mean that political elites are immune to cognitive processes and biases that affect individual decision making.

Of particular interest to this paper is the extent to which individuals’ personality traits, as measured by the Big Five factor model (e.g., McCrae and John 1992), influence their political ambition and decision to run for office. While some may question the rational choice paradigm of political ambition by looking at individual level differences, the existence of such differences is not necessarily contradictory to these models. Rather, these differences in character (and personality traits in particular) may affect the perceived costs and benefits of running for office and the resulting decision to run.

In addition, the personality traits that influence political ambition and self-selection into office could also have real consequences for politicians’ behavior. A large body of research finds that individual differences are important for the political actions of citizens (e.g., Gerber et al. 2011b) while a small number of recent studies have shown that politicians’ personality trait profiles differ from the public’s (Best 2011; Caprara et al. 2003, 2010) and may also influence their decision

making in office (Best 2011; Caprara et al. 2010; Cuhadar et al. 2016; Dietrich et al. 2012; Ramey et al. 2017). Recent work has shown that the personality traits of members of Congress and state legislators predict a host of critically important behaviors in office, such as legislative effectiveness, support for obstructive procedures, and credit-claiming activities among others (Ramey et al. 2017) as well as legislators' self-stated enjoyment of participating in committee hearings and working on legislation (Dietrich et al. 2012). More generally, personality traits are associated with behaviors that are potentially relevant for politicians' actions on the campaign trail and in office, such as individuals' risk preferences (Nicholson et al. 2005), creativity and adaptability in work tasks (LePine et al. 2000), leadership ability (Judge et al. 2002; Roberts et al. 2007), cooperativeness (VandenBos 2007), and altruism (Almlund et al. 2011; DeYoung et al. 2010).

Though analyzing how politicians' personality traits affect their behavior in office is beyond the scope of this paper, the existing and suggestive evidence of these effects highlights the importance of understanding how individual traits might also correspond with the political ambition that motivates individuals to seek public office in the first place, a question about which we have only a limited understanding. Only recently have scholars begun to analyze variations in nascent political ambition and progressive ambition among the general public and public officials (Fox and Lawless 2005; Lawless and Fox 2004; Maestas et al. 2006; Stone and Maisel 2003). These recent studies have looked at individual factors related to politics that motivate both the initial run for public office (which we refer to as nascent political ambition) and the eagerness with which public officials seek and take opportunities to run for higher office (which we refer to as progressive ambition). However, most of the factors that have been used to explain both types of ambition have been demographic characteristics or measures of general political interest and engagement (e.g., Lawless and Fox 2010). The literature has generally ignored underlying personality differences like personality traits even though they have been shown to have a considerable influence on individual behavior and may be an important mechanism linking genetic factors to political participation (e.g., Dawes et al. 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Early studies of political elites found that the traits of those in elected office often differed substantially from the general population (Lasswell 1948; McConaughy 1950). These studies, however, did not look at how these differences corresponded to changes in ambition. Thus, while these older studies suggest that individual traits

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich et al. (2012) report the results of a study of the relationship between personality and ambition (among other things) of a small sample of 90 legislators from Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine. This small sample limits their ability to find relationships between progressive ambition and personality. In addition, the unique public campaign finance laws in these three states at that time which all allowed for the wholesale public financing of state legislative campaigns might change the political environment in a way that changes how personality influences ambition. The public financing of campaigns changes the types of candidates who succeed and how candidates spend their time (Miller 2014), which could seriously impact the attractiveness of seeking higher office to candidates with certain personalities. On top of this, Dietrich and colleagues only examine progressive ambition among this small sample of legislators and do not examine the effect of personality on nascent ambition in the general public. Most relevant in the general population is Clifford et al.'s (forthcoming) examination of the relationship of individual levels of empathy to political ambition.

could affect political ambition, it could also be the case that voters are just more supportive of certain types of candidates (Todorov et al. 2005).

In this paper, we argue that political ambition is deeper than a set of structural incentives or even demographic characteristics that others have reported. Rather, individual personality traits play a significant (but slightly different) role in the development of both nascent political ambition and progressive ambition—they structure how individuals respond to various incentives and opportunities related to seeking elective office.

To examine the effect of personality on nascent political ambition, we use a nationally representative survey of US adults. We show that individuals with certain personality traits as measured by the five-factor model are more likely to express an interest in running for higher office. Specifically, those with higher levels of extraversion and openness to experience are more likely to express an interest in running for public office in the future, while those with higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness are less likely to do so.<sup>2</sup>

To test the effect of personality on progressive ambition, we also survey public officials currently serving in local office. Again, we find that individuals with certain personality traits are more likely to express progressive ambition and that the relationship between personality traits and ambition is slightly different for those in office compared to the general population. Consistent with our nascent ambition findings, we show that public officials who have higher levels of extraversion and openness are more likely to express interest in running for higher office. In contrast to nascent ambition, public officials with higher levels of emotional stability are also more likely to express progressive ambition. We also find that public officials with higher levels of agreeableness are less likely than those with low levels of agreeableness to express interest in running for public office as the likelihood of winning higher office increases. Combined, these findings show that the desire to run for political office is not merely the result of a set of underlying structural factors and individual demographic traits. Instead, we find that people with certain personalities have more political ambitions.

## Political Ambition

Rather than incorporating individual qualities or traits that may affect an individual propensity to run for office, studies of political ambition largely have assumed ambition to be uniform across individuals. Schlesinger's (1966) *Ambition in Politics* set the stage for this approach to political ambition. Schlesinger and those who followed him placed running for office as a strategic response of individuals to the institutional structure and political opportunities available to them (Abramson et al. 1987; Black 1972; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966). In these studies, the decision to run for office is a rational calculation of the benefits of winning multiplied by the

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<sup>2</sup> Replication files available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/1AZYRE>.

chances of winning minus the costs to run. The inclusion of personal traits or characteristics that might affect individual costs or benefits has largely been ignored, and ambition has been considered a constant among politicians.

Only recently have scholars started to examine variations in nascent political ambition among the general public (Fox and Lawless 2005; Lawless and Fox 2004). However, the factors used to explain differences in nascent ambition have largely been demographic factors and individual resources related to potential candidates' connection to politics rather than individual personality characteristics. Individual characteristics have only explicitly been included as a part of the process when they limit the ability of individuals to run either due to the lack of financial or experiential resources or due to a lack of familiarity with the political process (Fox and Lawless 2005, 2011, 2014; Maestas et al. 2006).

In this work, we take a step back and examine the underlying personality traits associated with being politically ambitious in the first place. We do not believe that individual level characteristics are necessarily at odds with the rational choice model but, rather, may provide a more complete understanding of the decision-making process. Many individual level characteristics affect the decision to run for office because they affect the cost–benefit analysis of running. While personality traits change the biases that affect decision-making, they may also affect the comfort that certain individuals have in certain campaign and office holding situations and the desirability of those experiences.

Moreover, we believe this is a fruitful place to look because personality is strongly correlated with other similar non-political actions such as selection into managerial positions, managerial success, and job searching (Boudreau et al. 2001). Yet, while previous work has also found connections between personality and political behaviors (e.g., Gerber et al. 2011b), running for office is distinct from other forms of political participation that require far less effort and public attention. Indeed, as chronicled below, we find some significant evidence that the personality traits that are related to engagement in other political actions are not the same as the personality traits that are related to running for political office.

## The Personalities of Political Elites

The study of political elites has not always been entirely about the political environment and institutions. Early studies of political elites highlighted personal characteristics and traits of these individuals rather than focusing exclusively on institutional structures that might govern decision-making (Barber 1965; Browning and Jacob 1964; Fishel 1971; Greenstein 1967; Lasswell 1948). These earlier works argued that political elites were not merely a randomly drawn subset of individuals from the general public but, rather, had distinct qualities and traits from the masses (Fishel 1971; Lasswell 1948).

Among other things, limited tests of a small sample of South Carolina state legislators in the 1940s showed that political elites were less neurotic and introverted as measured using an earlier metric of individual personality (McConaughy 1950). At the same time, however, other studies found that, in

many ways, local politicians were similar to others in upper middle class society.<sup>3</sup> Politicians and those in middle class society held similar characteristics on such attributes as power-seeking, affiliation inclination, and achievement as measured using an individualized measure developed out of the Thematic Apperception Test (Browning and Jacob 1964).<sup>4</sup>

Although scholars of that time made significant progress in this line of inquiry, the lack of a means to sufficiently measure and isolate the configuration of personality variables among individuals in public office limited the ability to continue this area of research (Greenstein 1967). While new tools to measure personality have been developed since then, administering personality tests to politicians is difficult.

In addition, these earlier efforts to understand the personalities of political elites looked at the individuals who hold office indiscriminately, rather than examining the desire to hold political office or a desire to seek higher office. While this previous evidence suggests that personality may influence political ambition, differences in personality between the general public and the political elite could be the result of voters who are more inclined to support candidates with certain personalities or that certain personality traits help candidates run more effective campaigns (Todorov et al. 2005). Thus, an alternative explanation could be that personality does not influence nascent political ambition, rather the electoral screen that filters the aspirants from the office holders favors individuals with certain personality traits. Combined, the limited evidence connecting personality to ambition is merely suggestive as well as dated, limited, and not entirely consistent in its findings.

## Personality, Political Behaviors, and Political Ambition

Over the last several decades, students of personality have used the lexical approach to identify five facets of personality (Big Five). Regardless of culture or the number of items included in the list of adjectives, five factors consistently emerge as dominant features of individual personality (McCrae 2002). Although adolescents and seniors may exhibit sharp changes in response to life experiences, the five personality traits show remarkable stability over the course of one's life (Cobb-Clark and Schurer 2012; Specht et al. 2011). As we explain each trait below and its relationship to other behaviors both political and non-political, we develop a framework for understanding why personality influences political ambition.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In addition, Browning and Jacob (1964) note that there also were differences across communities where the balance of power between the business communities and public officials varied. They theorize that the centralization of power in a governing body relative to other community organizations may also affect the type of individuals who choose to run for office.

<sup>4</sup> The Thematic Apperception Test is a projective test based on psychodynamic theory which bases behavior on subconscious underlying factors whose merit (specifically because of its lack of validity and reliability) is now widely questioned in the psychological community (Cramer 1999; Lilienfeld et al. 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Mondak et al. (2010, Chap. 2) for an extensive literature review on each personality trait.

Those high in extraversion are more interested in the breadth of activities than the depth. In groups, they tend to assert themselves, be noticed, dominate conversation, and enjoy interacting with others. Extraverts have numerous friendships, enterprising vocational interests and activities, and have high interest in politics (McCrae and Costa 2008).

We expect that individuals recognize that seeking and holding office entails regular interactions with constituents and other public officials both on the campaign trail and in office, which is enjoyable to extraverts, increasing the perceived benefits of running for and holding office. Given the positive association between extraversion and both overconfidence (Schaefer et al. 2004) and risk propensity (Nicholson et al. 2005), extraverts may be less fazed by the prospects of losing and more optimistic in their assessment of their chances of winning office and their ability to manage the tasks of governing, which would reduce the perceived costs of running while raising the perceived benefits. The activities that make running for public office so appealing to an extravert would be exhausting for an introvert. As such, we expect a positive relationship between extraversion and political ambition; not just because extraversion is connected with higher political activity, but because introverts strongly lack interest in activities associated with running for public office, which leads us to our first set of hypotheses:

**H1a (Extraversion and Political Ambition)** Individuals with higher levels of extraversion will be more likely to express nascent political ambition.

**H1b (Extraversion and Progressive Ambition)** Local officials with higher levels of extraversion will be more likely to express progressive ambition.

People who are high in openness to experience tend to be creative. They are intellectually curious, are more sensitive to beauty, and enjoy art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, and variety of experiences. Openness is associated with being interested in politics and having many different hobbies and vocational interests (McCrae and Costa 2008). For those who have not run for office, running for public office provides a range of new and unique experiences. It could challenge the individual to respond to new situations and expose them to additional information. An interest in politics and opportunities for new experiences might cause those high in openness to be more amenable to the idea of running for office by raising their personal sense of benefits.

**H2 (Openness and Political Ambition)** Individuals with higher levels of openness to experience will be more likely to express nascent political ambition.

Conditional on already having obtained public office, the experience of running for a higher office may not seem as unique or new. However, holding higher office itself, especially if it is a move from municipal government to state government, should represent a new enough experience to be interesting to open individuals. At the same time, Dietrich et al. (2012) anticipated that state legislators who were more open to experience would express higher levels of progressive ambition for similar reasons mentioned here, yet they failed to find evidence for this expectation using a small sample of 90 state legislatures from three small states. Thus, we are not as certain about its relationship.

Agreeableness captures concern for social harmony. Those high in this trait tend to work well in teams, trust other people, show kindness to others, and compromise. So far, no direct effects have been found between agreeableness and political engagement in the US (Gerber et al. 2011b; Mondak et al. 2010).

In this study, we address two components of agreeableness that influence both nascent and progressive political ambition. First, individuals with higher levels of agreeableness might dislike the process of running for political office. In 2012, 78% of Americans indicated they were frustrated by the current tone of political discourse, and almost 60% believed political campaigns lacked civility and respect (Hartman 2012). The process of office seeking in the United States places individuals in situations where they will interact with others who disagree with them and where previous decisions receive public scrutiny, both of which are anathema to agreeable individuals.

Second, agreeable individuals may not enjoy being an elected official. At present, political conflict is prevalent in the policy process. In the US, politics does not provide the kind of work environment that would appeal to individuals who derive meaning and satisfaction from pleasing others and creating social harmony. Mondak and Halperin (2008) note the incongruence of political participation for agreeable individuals. On the one hand, people high in agreeableness want to work with others to accomplish positive outcomes, which should incline them toward political participation. On the other, the widespread political discord might motivate them to look for other means to achieve their social harmony goals. This, too, might contribute to lower levels of political ambition in the general population. These two factors likely raise the perceived costs of running and holding office, leading to the following hypothesis:

**H3a (Agreeableness and Political Ambition)** Individuals with higher levels of agreeableness will be less likely to express nascent political ambition.

Local political officials have already experienced the negativity of political campaigning to win office. Yet, for reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, agreeable public officials might also be less inclined to *hold* higher office. If so, we would expect the relationship between agreeableness and progressive ambition among local officials to be conditional on the probability of winning higher office. The increased antagonism of political and affective polarization at the state and national levels may not dissuade those with lower levels of agreeableness. In addition, holding higher office increases both public attention to and public scrutiny of one's performance in office, both of which are unappealing to agreeable people. In contrast, less agreeable individuals are more likely to see themselves as being better qualified to make decisions and less concerned about offending constituents or other public officials. Thus, while we would expect progressive ambition to increase as the probability of victory increases, that may not be true for agreeable local officials. Quite the contrary, we expect agreeable public officials to be *less* interested in running for higher office when they believe they have a higher probability of victory.



**H3b (Agreeableness and Progressive Ambition)** Local officials with higher levels of agreeableness will be less likely to express progressive political ambition.

**H3c (Agreeableness, the Likelihood of Winning, and Progressive Ambition)** Local officials with lower levels of agreeableness will be more likely to express progressive ambition than local officials with higher levels of agreeableness as their perceived probability of winning higher office increases.

The existing literature is unclear about how conscientiousness might be associated with political ambition. Conscientious people aim for achievement and strive to fulfill their duties. These individuals enjoy planning for the future and prefer to think carefully about their decision-making rather than being spontaneous (DeYoung et al. 2007; Thompson 2008). Those low in conscientiousness are impulsive, spontaneous, disorganized, and are more likely to engage in anti-social behavior (Ozer and Benet-Martinez 2006). Politically, conscientiousness is associated with being less likely to vote regularly (Gerber et al. 2011a). Our expectations for conscientiousness are mixed. McCrae and Costa (2008) argue that the basic tendency of conscientious individuals is striving for achievement. Conscientious people have a strong sense of purpose and high levels of aspiration. This is what motivates them to be organized and plan for the future.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, because conscientious individuals think carefully before taking action, they will be more likely to thoroughly consider the costs and benefits of running for higher office. As such, they may be more realistic about the costs of running for office and the chances of winning, which would make them less interested in running for elective office. Conscientious individuals are also more inclined to loss aversion (Boyce et al. 2016), which would increase the costs of losing. Lastly, the reactionary nature of campaigns could repel conscientious individuals from seeking office. The same logic applies to local officials who have experience with campaigns and public office. Because of these conflicting processes, we do not have a clear expectation for the effect of higher levels of conscientiousness on nascent political or progressive ambition.

Finally, emotional stability is more often characterized by its opposite (neuroticism). Those with high levels of emotional stability are less likely to experience negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or depression. Emotionally stable individuals are less likely to view ordinary situations as threatening and are less likely to have negative reactions to everyday experiences that last for long periods of time. In the US, emotional stability is associated with having a strong interest in politics and expressing it (Gerber et al. 2011a), which suggests that emotionally stable individuals would have greater interest in running for office. However, emotionally stable individuals are also less likely to have a large social network or try to persuade others to vote (Mondak et al. 2010), essential characteristics to campaign success. As such, we do not have strong antecedent expectations on the relationship between emotional stability and nascent political ambition in the general public.

<sup>6</sup> McCrae and Costa (2008) argue this is why Richard Nixon ran for president.

Progressive ambition is slightly different, however. Using a small sample of state legislators, Dietrich et al. (2012) find that those with higher levels of emotional stability are more likely to be interested in running for higher office. They argue the risk of defeat does not spark anxiety among the emotionally stable, thus lowering the costs of running. Building on this, we expect that more emotionally stable local officials will be more likely to want to seek higher office.

**H4 (Emotional Stability and Progressive Ambition)** Local officials with higher levels of emotional stability will be more likely to express nascent progressive ambition.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted two studies on the relationship between ambition for running for office and personality traits as measured by the Big Five. The first study, which we describe below, employs data from a survey of US adults and allows us to examine how personality is associated with nascent political ambition. The second is a large survey of US elected municipal officials, allowing for an examination of the relationship between personality and progressive ambition.

## Study I: Personality and Nascent Political Ambition

In June, 2015, Clear Voice Research recruited a national sample of participants in their online panel to participate in a research project about political attitudes. For this survey, they sent out 51,492 invitations, 2488 began the survey (4.8% response rate) and 1939 (77.9%) completed the entire survey which is in line with the response and completion rates of other well-known online panel survey companies such as YouGov (Craig et al. 2013). Respondent demographics are similar to those of the US population on gender (49.2% female), race (80.6% white), party identification ( $R = 25\%$ ,  $D = 33.75\%$ ), education (60% completed some college or more), and age (mean = 50). Full information on the survey demographics and recruitment information is available in the Online Appendix. Using language from Lawless and Fox (2010), we asked respondents to indicate, “Which of the following best characterizes [their] attitude toward running for office in the future.” While only 1% of our respondents reported “actively considering” running for public office, 16% said that they were “open to the possibility of holding elective office in the future,” leaving 83% who reported “absolutely no interest” in holding elective office at any time in the future.

As part of the survey, respondents also completed a personality scale consisting of 31 adjectives selected from existing trait lists and inventories. These adjectives have been used in the MacArthur Foundation Survey (MIDUS) to measure personality traits for the last two decades (Brim et al. 2011; Ryff et al. 2012; Bem 1981; Goldberg 1992; Trapnell and Wiggins 1990).<sup>7</sup> Although scholars may opt to utilize shorter scales to measure personality (Rammstedt and John 2007), we used a more comprehensive measure for greater precision because we expected only a

<sup>7</sup> More than 100 published studies on personality have used this personality scale. A complete list is found at <http://www.midus.wisc.edu/findings/pubtopics.php?topic=personality>.

**Table 1** The influence of personality on the attractiveness of elective office. *Source* 2015 Survey of US Adults

	(1) No controls	(2) Demographic controls
Extraversion	0.610*** (0.138)	0.609*** (0.144)
Openness to experience	0.753*** (0.151)	0.415** (0.163)
Agreeableness	- 0.876*** (0.139)	- 0.677*** (0.147)
Conscientiousness	- 0.746*** (0.126)	- 0.506*** (0.135)
Emotional stability	0.015 (0.097)	- 0.024 (0.103)
Education: Less than high school		- 0.521 (0.602)
Education: High school		- 0.404** (0.195)
Education: Bachelor's degree		0.016 (0.160)
Education: Graduate degree		0.315 (0.206)
Income		0.010 (0.032)
Race: African American		0.506** (0.213)
Race: Asian		0.059 (0.318)
Race: Native American		0.168 (0.678)
Race: Hispanic		- 0.047 (0.303)
Race: Multi-racial		0.577 (0.362)
Ideology: Liberal		0.150 (0.173)
Ideology: Conservative		0.277 (0.173)
Party ID: Democrat		0.027 (0.162)
Party ID: Republican		- 0.159 (0.192)
Gender: Female		- 0.897*** (0.141)

**Table 1** continued

	(1) No controls	(2) Demographic controls
Age (in years)		– 0.023*** (0.005)
Constant cut1	0.560 (0.304)	– 0.4822 (0.385)
Constant cut2	3.419 *** (0.357)	2.4356*** (0.426)
Observations	1954	1935
AIC	1880.695	1810.338
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.057	0.106

Entries are ordered logistic regression coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses. Baseline categories are some college, white, moderate, independent, and male. Models with additional control variables and using a multinomial logistic regression model are in the Online Appendix. Results are not dependent on various model specifications

\*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1, two-tailed test

small percentage of respondents to indicate an “active” interest in seeking higher office (Bakker and Lelkes 2016). We ran the model looking at the relationship between personality and nascent ambition as an ordered logit model since the data on ambition have ordered categories.<sup>8</sup> The results from this regression are displayed in Table 1 and include a model with controls for age, income, education, party identification, ideology, race, and gender (column 2) and one without controls (column 1) due to their likely correlation with the Big Five.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the results of the two models are similar, though including controls attenuates the coefficients on a few of the personality traits, which we anticipated given that the Big Five predict a large range of individual behaviors and outcomes that also correlate with nascent ambition. The only personality trait not associated with being at least open to the possibility of holding office is emotional stability. Those who are emotionally stable are equally likely to be interested in holding elective office as those who are not. Consistent with theoretical expectations, extraverts and those who are open to experience are significantly more likely to express nascent political ambition (H1a, H2). Recall that those high in extraversion enjoy interacting with others, and as such the idea of holding elective office represents an experience that would have strong appeal to extraverts. Likewise, open individuals are also intellectually curious and seek a variety of experiences which would make holding elective office an attractive opportunity.

In contrast, conscientious and agreeable individuals are significantly less interested in holding elective office. Agreeable individuals seek to avoid conflict and to please other people. The idea of holding elective office likely accentuates the

<sup>8</sup> Since the dependent variable (political ambition) has three distinct categorical options, we also fit a multinomial logit regression model which can be found in the Online Appendix. The results are identical in their statistically significant effects to those shown here.

<sup>9</sup> Our findings are robust to models with additional controls as seen in the Online Appendix.

impossibility of these two. Not only does campaigning for elective office require conflict, the duties of elected office require people to make decisions that will please some and displease others. Even if an agreeable person were appointed to an elected office without standing in an election, the business of elected officials involves considerable conflict as divergent interests seek to shape the policy agenda (H3a).

As noted in our hypotheses, we did not have a strong expectation for the effect of conscientiousness. For some it may be surprising that conscientiousness is negatively associated with a desire to hold elective office. After all, conscientious people are motivated to achieve great things and accomplish their duties, both of which seem like goals that could be accomplished through elective office (McCrae and Costa 2008). Yet, at the same time, conscientious people also do not like spontaneity. They prefer an orderly, predictable life, which may not be consistent with seeking and holding elective office.

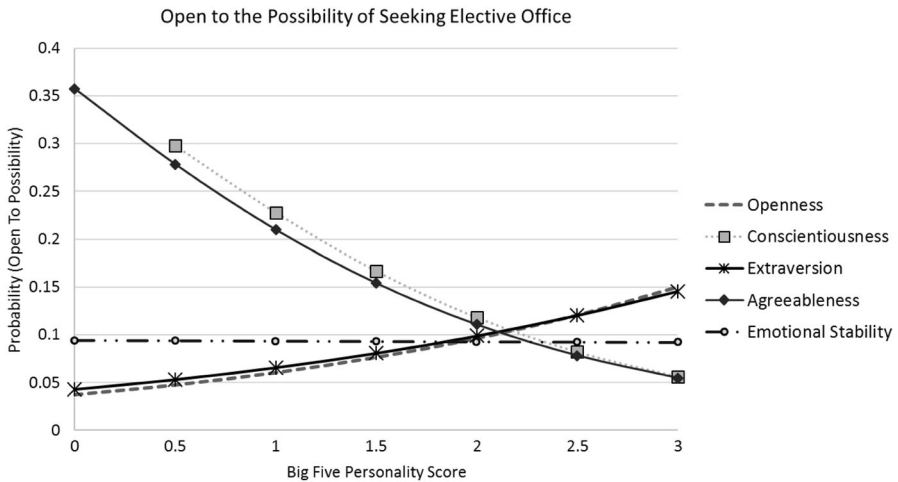
Figure 1 plots the predicted probability of individuals expressing they were “open to the possibility of holding elective office” at each level of a personality trait from column 2 of Table 1.<sup>10</sup> We discuss the size of personality effects in the context of being open to running for elected office because this measure most accurately captures general political ambition among the masses. To provide a comparison for interpreting the size of the coefficients on the personality traits, we compare the substantive effects of these variables to those from Lawless and Fox’s (2010) previous work on this topic.<sup>11</sup>

Of the four statistically significant personality traits, openness has the weakest substantive effect on interest in running for office. A move in openness from the 25th percentile (openness score = 1.71) to the 75th (2.43) predicts a 2 point change in the probability of being open to the possibility of running for higher office. Extraversion and agreeableness have similar sized effects, though in the opposite directions. For extraversion, an increase from the 25th (1.4) to the 75th (2.4) percentile increases the probability that the person will be open to running for higher office by 4.5 points while moving from the 25th (2) to the 75th (2.8) percentile in terms of agreeableness *decreases* openness to running by 4 points. Though these coefficients may not appear substantively large, they are similar to the effects of income and political knowledge from Lawless and Fox’s (2010) analysis, who find that going from the minimum to maximum value on these variables (and not just from the 25th to 75th percentiles) changes the probability that someone has considered running for office by 7–8% points. With openness and extraversion, the effects are 11–12% points when similarly comparing respondents on the extreme ends of both variables. For agreeableness, the effect size at the extremes is roughly 30% points.

Conscientiousness has the largest substantive effect among the five personality traits. The model predicts that an individual at the 25th percentile (1.2) is 10 points

<sup>10</sup> Figures with confidence intervals and the predicted probability of each response are in the Online Appendix. Figure 1 is a simplified version of Figure A.3 in the Online Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> An important difference between our samples is that Lawless and Fox (2010) survey adults from the four professions and backgrounds that are most common among political candidates. In addition, the dependent variable from Lawless and Fox (2010) is “whether a respondent ever considered running for” office instead of whether they are open to running. Nonetheless, their results provide a benchmark comparison.



**Fig. 1** The influence of personality traits on interest in elective office. Lines are the predicted probabilities from the ordered logistic regression model using the effects package in R 3.13. Confidence intervals omitted intentionally for ease of interpretation. Full results with confidence intervals are in the Online Appendix. *Source* 2015 Survey of US Adults

less likely to be interested in running for elective office than an individual at the 75th percentile (2). This is similar to the effect of gender in Lawless and Fox (2010), where females were 16% points less likely to consider running for office. In our own analysis, we find that females are 10% points less open to running while those at the lowest education levels are 9% points less open to running than those at the highest. At the extremes, however, those who are the most conscientious are about 25% points less interested in running for office than those who are the least conscientious.

The cumulative effects of personality traits, even when limited to comparisons of those at the 25th and 75th percentiles, can be rather large. For instance, if we take someone with a personality profile that predicts interest in running for office—i.e., someone at the 25th percentile in agreeableness and conscientiousness and at the 75th percentile in openness and extraversion—and compare them to someone with the reversed personality profile, the difference in the probability that they will express an openness to running for office is about 21% points, which is similar in size to the effect of political interest (23% points) and education (20% points) in Lawless and Fox’s (2010) analysis and twice the size of the effect of gender and education in our own results.

In sum, we find that personality traits have a significant, substantively large association with nascent political ambition that operate independent of other variables previous work associates with political ambition. Some personality traits have a stronger influence on nascent ambition than others. The extent to which conscientiousness motivates a lack of political ambition is quite large as is the cumulative effect of these different personality traits.

## Study II: Personality and Political Ambition Among Municipal Officials

The preceding is sufficient to show that personality traits influence the attractiveness of running for public office among the general public. However, as we discussed previously, nascent political ambition is different than progressive ambition. Moreover, most people have never held nor sought elective office, which makes it difficult for them to assess whether or not they would enjoy or be interested in running for higher political office. Holding public office may be appealing in the abstract but could take on an entirely different meaning among those who are familiar with the duties of elective office and the election process. Individuals with realistic shots at winning higher office may be fundamentally different than the general population. For instance, candidates with past political experience are more likely to enjoy electoral success when seeking office (Jacobson and Kernell 1981). It is also possible that the election process selects for individuals with certain traits and changes the nature of the relationship between personality and ambition.

To analyze personality and progressive ambition, we conducted a survey of elected municipal officials from across the US. The sample is similar to ones used in previous work to understand municipal officials' decision-making (e.g., Butler et al. 2017), including on issues of candidate emergence (Butler and Preece 2016) since party elites look to sub-county officials for candidates for county and state offices (Crowder-Meyer 2013). Our questions concerning political ambition and personality were one of several projects in the survey.

The survey was conducted in two waves sent to two different samples of municipal officials. Invitations to the first wave were sent in May and June of 2016 to a sample of 27,862 elected mayors and legislators (e.g., city councilors, aldermen, supervisors, etc.) from 4187 cities with a population above 10,000. This wave had a 17.8% response rate similar to other surveys of municipal officials (Butler and Dynes 2017). The second wave of the survey was conducted in June and July of 2016. The sample consisted of 29,250 email addresses of elected mayors and city councilors (or equivalent) gathered by Butler and Dynes for the 2012 and 2014 American Municipal Officials Survey. Given that these email addresses were gathered two to four years prior to this latest survey, we knew that a large percentage of the emails and names of the officials (in the case of cities that use generic email accounts for each office) would no longer be accurate. Indeed, 26% of the emails sent through Qualtrics were undeliverable. It is likely that many more of the email addresses are no longer monitored though they remain active. With 1500 officials participating, the response rate for the second round of the survey was 6.9%. More details about the sample frame, the response rate, and the methodology are available in the Online Appendix.

The dependent variable in the analysis is local officials' progressive ambition, which we measured with the same question used by Lawless and Fox (2010). The survey asked elected officials, "Which best characterizes your attitudes toward running for a higher office in the future?" Respondents had four options (with the percent choosing each one in parentheses): (1) "It is something I would absolutely never do" (16%); (2) "I would not rule it out forever, but I currently have no

interest” (44%); (3) “It is something I might undertake if the opportunity presented itself” (26%); (4) “It is something I definitely would like to undertake in the future” (13%). Given the clear ordering to these responses, we report an ordered logistic regression model and a multinomial logistic regression model. We also note the large proportion of local officials open to running for higher office, with 39.7% choosing the latter two categories.

The key independent variables in our analysis are respondents’ Big Five personality traits, which we measured using the Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10). The BFI-10 uses two items per personality trait and has been shown to “retain significant levels of reliability and validity” compared to a 44-item measure of the Big Five (Rammstedt and John 2007, 203). However, Rammstedt and John (2007, 210) find the losses in reliability are greatest with the two-item measure of agreeableness. To mitigate this, we followed their recommendation of adding a third agreeableness item. Plots displaying the distribution of each personality measure for our general population sample and the sample of public officials are available in the Online Appendix and show how the prevalence of these traits are different in each sample.<sup>12</sup>

In the analysis, as before, we included several control variables that might influence an elected official’s willingness to seek higher office. Margin of victory is a dichotomous variable that is coded as a one if the elected official won their last election by less than 5% of the vote. Years in office is the number of years that the elected official has been in their current position. Anticipated length in current office is the number of years they said that they planned to remain in their current position. We also asked if their current office had term limits. Those who are forced by statute to leave their existing position might be more likely to seek higher office. We also included a dichotomous variable coded as a one if the elected official was selected in an election in which their party affiliation appears on the ballot and zero if it does not.

Previous work has shown that partisan considerations play a role in the realization of progressive ambition and recruitment for higher office (Maestas et al. 2006). To account for this, we asked them to suppose that their current office was vacant and tell us the probability that an individual with similar views as themselves would be selected to fill their seat. The variable labeled “Probability current seat filled by similar candidate” is the numeric (0–100) percent chance that they believe their current seat would be filled with someone like themselves. We also expect ambition to be influenced by an individual’s likelihood of winning. As such, we asked them to estimate the probability that someone like themselves would win an open state legislative seat, the next highest office available to all municipal

<sup>12</sup> A major concern with self-reported personality tests taken by elected officials is social desirability bias in their responses (Rommel 2016). Elected officials may be reluctant to admit that they “get nervous easily” or are not “kind to almost everyone,” even in a confidential survey. Rommel (2016) examines this concern by conducting a Big Five personality test on Vermont state legislators and then comparing these self-reports to peer-reports of those same state legislators completed by their friends, spouses, and/or adult children. Rommel (2016) finds a strong correlation between the self-reports and peer-reports. Moreover, the results suggest that the self-reports are less prone to social-desirability bias than the peer-reports, as state legislators were more likely to agree with the more negative statements than their peers.



**Table 2** The influence of personality on progressive political ambition. *Source* 2016 American Municipal Officials Survey

	(1) No controls	(2) Ambition/gender controls
Extraversion	0.162*** (0.056)	0.154** (0.060)
Openness to experience	0.022 (0.059)	0.003 (0.063)
Agreeableness	- 0.106 (0.082)	- 0.169* (0.087)
Conscientiousness	0.0003 (0.077)	0.060 (0.083)
Emotional stability	0.112* (0.061)	0.102 (0.067)
Won previous election by 5% pts. or less		0.028 (0.136)
Years in office		- 0.005*** (0.002)
Anticipated length in current office		0.006*** (0.001)
Term limits exist for current office		- 0.001 (0.005)
Partisan elections		- 0.015* (0.008)
Probability current seat filled by similar candidate		- 0.003*** (0.002)
Probability similar candidate could win state legislative seat		0.006*** (0.002)
Gender: Female		- 0.028 (0.091)
Cut 1	- 1.289*** (0.269)	- 1.425*** (0.301)
Cut 2	0.770** (0.267)	0.753** (0.299)
Cut 3	2.233*** (0.272)	2.253*** (0.304)
Observations	2398	2133
AIC	6126.833	5389.561
McFadden Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.279	0.364

Entries are ordered logistic regression coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1, two-tailed test

officials.<sup>13</sup> The variable labeled “Probability similar candidate could win state legislative seat” is their perceived percent chance.

Looking at the ordered logit regression in Table 2, we can see how personality traits correlate with progressive ambition.<sup>14</sup> First, consistent with the study of nascent political ambition in the general public, we find that public officials with higher levels of extraversion are more interested in running for higher office (H1b) while those who are higher in agreeableness are less interested (H3b), though we note that this effect is not statistically significant across all of our models. We also find some suggestive evidence that more emotionally stable individuals are more likely to express interest in running for higher office, consistent with our expectations (H4). This finding is different than what we found in the previous study of the national population, but consistent with earlier studies of progressive ambition among elected officials (Dietrich et al. 2012). For the public in general, the prospects of running for office may be dominated by concerns about the electoral process. In truth, the job of elected officials “usually involves a wide range of demanding and often tedious tasks” (Oliver et al. 2012, p. 90). People low in emotional stability would soon discover that their personality is not well suited for the stresses of elected office.

Our expectations for openness and conscientiousness were mixed. Consistent with that, the coefficients on these personality traits in the ordered logit model are both substantively and statistically insignificant. Given that this is different from what we found in the previous study regarding nascent political ambition, we conclude that conscientious office holders think differently than the general public about the desirability of holding higher elected office. Thus, conscientiousness may be associated with some forms of ambition (McCrae and Costa 2008), but not progressive political ambition. One simple explanation for this stems from Mondak et al. (2010) finding that conscientiousness triggers political participation for some but not others. He argues that conscientious people participate in politics when they perceive that the political world is worthy of and responsive to their efforts. Conscientious elected officials have decided to use the political process to help them achieve their goals, which negates that which motivates a negative relationship in the general population. This is likely the reason why conscientious House members are more likely to sponsor important legislation (Ramey et al. 2017, p. 126). Once a conscientious person chooses the political route to achieve their goals, they do not waste their time.

The control variables also reveal some interesting findings. One that will be of particular interest to scholars of gender and political ambition is our finding that female local politicians appear to be just as open to running for higher office as their male colleagues. The negative coefficient on the indicator variable for female officials fails to reach statistical significance and is substantively small, predicting a 1% point difference between men and women. We also find evidence that static ambition—i.e., the desire to “make a long career out of a particular office” (Schlesinger 1966, p. 10)—crowds out progressive ambition as those who have served longer in their current office or plan to do so are less likely to express

<sup>13</sup> Not all municipal officials are from counties that have county-level elected offices.

<sup>14</sup> Results from a multinomial logistic regression model is in the Online Appendix.

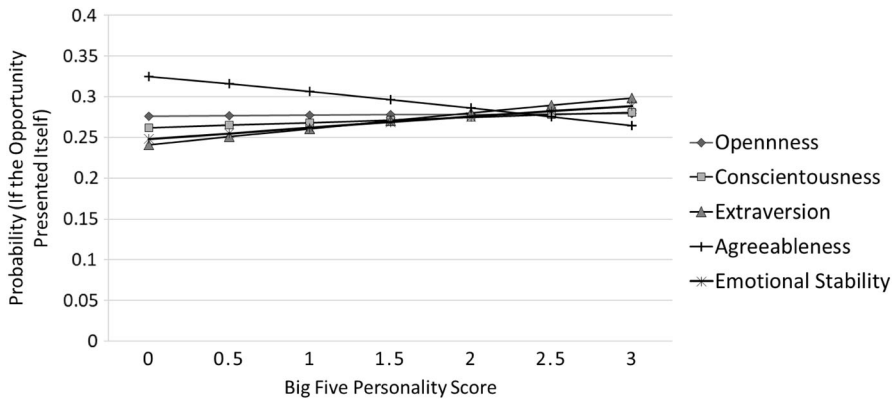
progressive ambition. Though we thought that close elections, term limits, and partisan elections might influence elected officials' plans for higher office, we fail to find evidence of such effects.<sup>15</sup> Rather, local officials' perceptions about their ability to win higher office and the likelihood that someone like them would replace them if they left their current seat are better predictors of progressive ambition. As expected, those who believe someone like them could win their district's state legislative race are more likely to express progressive ambition. However, the coefficient on local officials' beliefs about their seat being filled by someone like them is negative even though we anticipated it to be positive. One possible explanation is that this measure is picking up on local officials' beliefs about their own chances of holding on to their current seat. Those who believe the chances are low that someone like them could win their seat may also believe that their own chances of keeping their seat are low and as a result, are more open to the idea of running for another office to maintain their status as a public official.

To examine the substantive size of the results on our main variables of interest, we turn to Fig. 2, which plots the predicted probabilities of elected officials' responding that they might run for higher office if the opportunity presents itself for each of the big five personality measures based on the results in column 2.<sup>16</sup> Based on these results, the probability that someone at the 25th percentile of emotional stability (emotional stability score = 1.88) will be open to the possibility of running for higher office is 1% point lower than someone who scores at the 75th percentile (2.63) (H4). At the extreme ends, the difference is percentage points. However, we note that this relationship is only statistically significant at the 0.1 level in our model without controls, column (1). We also find that introverted elected officials are less interested in pursuing higher elected office. The model predicts that someone at the 25th percentile in extraversion (1.50) is 2% points less likely to be open to running for higher elected office than someone who scores at the 75th percentile (2.63) (H1b). Finally, the more agreeable the elected official, the less likely they are to say that they are open to running for higher office. The model predicts that an elected official in the 25th percentile of agreeableness (2) is about 2% points more interested in running for higher office than a municipal official in the 75th percentile (2.75) of agreeableness. When comparing officials at the highest and lowest levels of extraversion and agreeableness, the differences in the probability of being open to higher office increase to about 6% points. As with emotional stability, the coefficient on agreeableness is only statistically significant at the 0.1 level in one of our models, column (2).

Cumulatively, these results suggest that someone with a personality profile that is more predisposed to running for higher office—i.e., at the 75th percentile in emotional stability and extraversion and the 25th percentile in agreeableness—will be about 5% points more likely to be open to running for higher office than someone with the opposite profile. With 40% of officials indicating an openness to running, this is a significant difference and is similar in size to the substantive effects of the

<sup>15</sup> Though the coefficient on the indicator variable for partisan elections is statistically significant at the 0.10 level, the substantive effect is practically zero.

<sup>16</sup> The Online Appendix has figures with the predicted probabilities for each of the options in the multinomial logit model. Figure 2 is a simplified version of Figure A.4 in the Online Appendix.



**Fig. 2** The influence of personality traits on progressive political ambition. Lines are the predicted probabilities from the ordered logistic regression calculated using the effects package in R 3.13. Confidence intervals omitted intentionally for ease of interpretation. Full results with confidence intervals are in the Online Appendix. *Source* 2016 American Municipal Officials Survey

other control variables. For example, officials at the 75th percentile in years in office (12 years) are 6% points less interested in higher office than those at the 25th percentile (4 years). Similarly, if we compare those at the 25th percentile in their belief that a similar candidate could win their state legislative seat (41% chance) to those at the 75th percentile (82% chance), the probability they might run if the opportunity presents itself increases 3% points. The substantive effects on the other control variables are even smaller.

As laid out in our theory section, we anticipated that personality traits would have a somewhat different relationship with nascent ambition than progressive ambition. Our findings also suggest personality traits are weaker predictors of progressive ambition among elected officials than they are of nascent ambition among the general population. This is consistent with our argument that the general public's (and even potential candidates') views on the costs and benefits of running for office are less informed relative to those of local officials who have experience running for and holding office. As such, the latter's expressed interest in higher office is perhaps more affected by structural factors. In addition, local officials with a personality profile that may have predisposed them to be less enthusiastic about running for office in the first place (all else equal) have also learned that they can manage a campaign and win despite any misgivings that they may have had due to their personality traits. To the extent that it occurs, this learning process would diminish the relationship between personality and progressive ambition.

To further tease out the relationship between personality and interest in higher office, we present two additional models. In the first, we ask the elected officials to indicate the level of higher office (besides their current one) they might be interested in seeking. They were given the choice of local (e.g., city, county, school board), state (e.g., legislature, Governor), or national (e.g., Congress, President) level. Elected officials selected as many of these that interested them. We combined these responses into a single indicator that reflects the highest office that interests these elected

officials. Elected official who responded that both local office and state office appealed to them were marked as interested in state office. In all, 45% of the elected officials are only interested in holding local office, 41% are interested in holding state-level office, and 14% reported an interest in holding national office someday.<sup>17</sup>

Though many interesting findings emerge in this analysis, we focus on agreeableness. As we hypothesized, elected officials high in this trait are significantly less interested in running for higher political office. In fact, the higher the office, the less interested an agreeable person is in seeking that office. The results from the model displayed in Table 3 predicts that as an elected official moves from the first to the third quartile in agreeableness they are 15% less likely to be interested in holding national office (probability shifts from 0.15 to 0.13) and 5.5% less likely to be interested in running for a statewide race (probability shifts from 0.44 to 0.41). By contrast, the same change in agreeableness predicts that the local official will be 11.4% *more* interested in running for local office (probability shifts from 0.41 to 0.46). In all, these findings suggest that agreeableness is negatively associated with progressive ambition (H3b). Openness has the opposite effect. Increases in openness predict less interest in running for local office, but higher interest in running for statewide or national political office, which is consistent with the finding that individuals high in this trait enjoy new experiences.

Lastly, we examine how the likelihood of victory changes the nature of the relationship between agreeableness and progressive ambition. Recall that we argued previously that the combative, competitive, public forum and increased public attention and scrutiny that accompanies occupying higher office would decrease an agreeable person's interest in running for higher office. We hypothesized that agreeable elected officials' desire to run for higher office will be less affected by their perception of the likelihood that someone like them could win that office (H3c). To examine this, we asked the elected officials how likely it was that the corresponding state legislative seat would be filled by an individual like them. Elected officials entered a number between 0 and 100 indicating the percent chance that someone like them would win their state legislative seat if they were to run. Using the progressive ambition measure as our dependent variable, we estimated both a multinomial logit and an ordered logistic regression model with the same control variables as seen in Table 3. In addition, we included an interaction between agreeableness and the perceived probability of victory in the state legislative election.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 3 displays the predicted probability that an elected official will respond that they are "definitely" running for higher office depending on their perceived chance of victory and their agreeableness score. The probability of victory has a strong influence on whether those who score one standard deviation below the mean on agreeableness will run for higher office. When they think that there is an 80–100% chance that they could win that office, the probability of definitely seeking

<sup>17</sup> Some of these people are those who said they had no interest in higher office, but we asked them to indicate what office they would run for if they did.

<sup>18</sup> The full results of these models are Table A.4 in the Online Appendix. To conserve space, only the predicted probabilities are displayed.

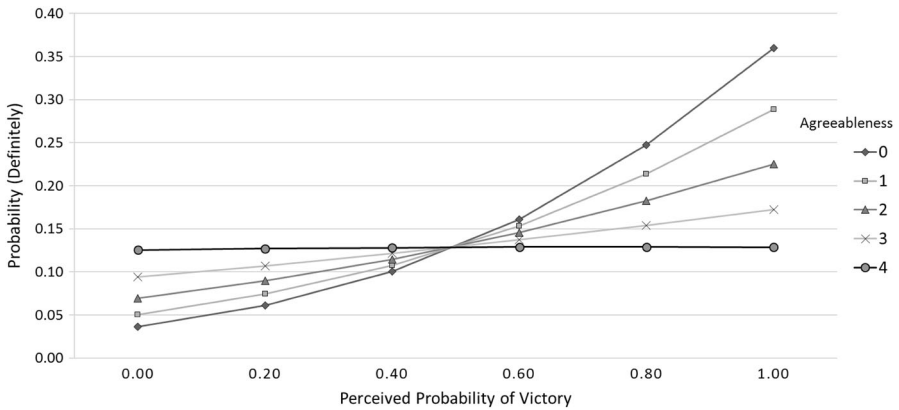
**Table 3** The influence of personality on the attractiveness higher elected offices. *Source* 2016 American Municipal Officials Survey

	(1) No controls	(2) Ambition/gender controls
Extraversion	0.080 (0.062)	0.103 (0.066)
Openness	0.149** (0.066)	0.154** (0.069)
Agreeableness	- 0.235** (0.092)	- 0.253*** (0.097)
Conscientiousness	- 0.026 (0.085)	- 0.001 (0.091)
Emotional stability	0.113 (0.070)	0.091 (0.075)
Won previous election by 5% or less		- 0.291* (0.153)
Years in office		- 0.0001 (0.002)
Anticipated length in current office		0.004** (0.002)
Term limits for current office		0.001 (0.006)
Partisan elections		- 0.003 (0.008)
Current seat filled with similar candidate		- 0.003* (0.002)
Legislative spot filled with similar candidate		0.003** (0.002)
Gender: Female		- 0.072 (0.099)
Cut 1	- 0.108 (0.296)	- 0.149 (0.329)
Cut 2	1.94*** (0.299)	1.93*** (0.332)
Observations	2096	1901
AIC	4177.963	3815.435
McFadden Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.25	0.31

Entries are ordered logit estimates, robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1, two-tailed test. Alternative models including other controls did not change the results

higher office is between 0.17 and 0.22. By contrast, if they think that there is less than a 20% chance of winning, we predict less than a 10% chance that they will express interest in running for higher office. Among elected officials who score at



**Fig. 3** Predicted progressive ambition by agreeableness and the perceived likelihood of success. Points are the predicted probabilities from the multinomial logit regression calculated using the effects package in R 3.13. Confidence intervals omitted intentionally for ease of interpretation. Full results with confidence intervals are in the Online Appendix. *Source* 2016 American Municipal Officials Survey

one standard deviation above the mean on the agreeableness scale (3.8), we see a completely different pattern. The probability of success has virtually no influence on whether an agreeable elected official expresses interest in higher office (H3c).

These findings are consistent with our theoretical expectations and the results from our general population study. Agreeableness is negatively associated with both nascent and progressive political ambition. The results presented here suggest that agreeable people avoid higher elected office, not because they are afraid of campaigning, but because of some aspect of holding higher elected office itself. It may be that voters prefer agreeable elected representatives (Caprara et al. 2003; Klingler et al. 2016), but people high in agreeableness are significantly less likely to be interested in running for higher office. Perhaps the acrimony seen in higher elective office in the US is a deterrent to holding office for agreeable individuals. Elected officials who seek harmony, cooperation, and are willing to defer to others are significantly less likely to seek higher elected office in the US.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that ambition is not constant and goes beyond the structural opportunities and even the demographic characteristics of potential candidates. We find that politically ambitious individuals are distinct in the personality traits that they hold, and those traits contribute to the interest that individuals express in pursuing political office in the first place (nascent political ambition) and in pursuing higher office once in office (progressive ambition). Individual personalities shape how individuals are attracted to the possibilities before them by affecting the perceived costs and benefits of seeking office.

More specifically, we find that individuals who express an interest in public office are more likely to have higher levels of extraversion and openness to

experience. At the same time, individuals with nascent political ambition are also more likely to be less agreeable and conscientious than the general public. Among individuals already in local public office, we find that those with higher levels of extraversion are more likely to express interest in seeking higher office. Perhaps unsurprisingly, political office is attractive to individuals who are outgoing and seek to be the center of attention. We also find that once in office, individuals with higher levels of emotional stability are more likely to express interest in seeking higher elective office, while those who are agreeable are less likely to express interest in seeking state or national office where partisan conflicts are more prominent, even when they believe their chances of winning office are high. These findings suggest that the nature of the political profession makes it more attractive to certain types of individuals.

In line with our argument that nascent ambition is different from other forms of political participation and progressive ambition in particular, we find that the relationship between personality traits and both nascent ambition and progressive ambition differs somewhat. These differences include our finding that municipal officials' personality traits are a weaker predictor of progressive ambition than the general public's personality traits are of nascent ambition, something we explore in more detail in discussing the results from Study II.

These findings may also explain, in part, the well observed gap between men and women in nascent political ambition. While women generally have higher levels of extraversion than men, they also have higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Schmitt et al. 2008), which likely decrease interest in running for office overall. In addition, women are also more likely to have lower levels of emotional stability (Schmitt et al. 2008) which would decrease their likelihood of having progressive ambition and seeking higher office. Further research is needed to understand how the personality traits of men and women might explain differences in political office holding.

In addition, ambition is only part of the process by which individuals end up in political office. We need to understand if and how the electoral process advantages candidates with certain traits. Moreover, the gendered recruitment and election process may also make women with distinct personality traits more likely to be selected into office regardless of political ambition. Further research is needed to understand how the gendered political environment affects the personality types of men and women who get into office.

The findings from these studies complement and refine a growing body of literature on how psychological factors, including personality traits, influence the political behavior of elites. Though the political psychology of mass behavior has been explored extensively, political scientists are only just beginning to apply approaches from political psychology to examine elite behavior. An important finding from this literature is that political elites and elected officials are susceptible to many of the same cognitive biases found in the masses that lead to sub-optimal decision-making (e.g., Sheffer and Loewen 2017; Sheffer et al. 2017). Moreover, these biases play a role even when they counter elected officials' reelection interests (Butler and Dynes 2016). These findings counter the dominant assumption in theories of elite behavior that politicians are more rational and strategic actors than



the masses. Understanding the personality traits of political elites can further illuminate which biases elected officials and candidates may be more prone to exhibit given their association with the Big Five (e.g., Schaefer et al. 2004).

Finally, while we do not explicitly address this here, these findings also raise questions about representation and how these traits affect the functioning of campaigns and government. In terms of campaign behavior, our finding that extraverts express more nascent and progressive ambition combined with the finding that they are also overconfident may help explain why many candidates, and especially self-financed ones, run despite the odds (Brown 2013). That agreeable individuals are less interested in running may further contribute to campaign incivility, which likely further drives away agreeable individuals. Interestingly, this is not consistent with findings from another political setting (Italy as per Caprara et al. 2003), suggesting that something unique about campaigning for and holding elected office in the US is causing agreeable individuals to be less interested in running. Our finding that more agreeable individuals in both the general population and among municipal officials are less interested in running for office may help explain increased polarization at higher levels of government (Ramey et al. 2017).

This last point also highlights the importance of distinguishing ambition to run from actually achieving office as we discuss the implications of our findings for representation and governance. The electoral process may favor individuals with certain personality traits despite those traits' influence on one's interest in running. Though outside the scope of this particular paper, additional work on the personality profile of elected officials and its relationship to their behavior in office is a fruitful avenue for future research.

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