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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Labor Union Membership and Women's Political Ambition: Evidence from the United States

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Abstract

Women have long been underrepresented in American politics. This is evidenced by women being less likely to run for and hold elected office. Existing scholarship largely focuses on explaining why women are less politically ambitious than their male counterparts but pays less attention to why some women do run for office. To this end, I focus on the potential role of labor union membership. I argue that labor unions can foster political ambition and increase ordinary people's likelihood of running for office. I test this among women in the American mass public, primarily with survey data from the 2010–22 Cooperative Election Study (CES). Overall, I find that labor union membership is significantly associated with women's likelihood of running for office. I also find that this robust relationship is unlikely to be driven by self-selection or omitted variable biases. Overall, these findings help us to better understand the sources of political ambition, illustrate a viable potential pathway to boost women's likelihood of seeking elected office, and underscore the political consequences of organized labor.

Keywords: labor unions; political ambition; women; gender; running for office; United States

A defining characteristic of American politics, and of many democracies across the globe, is the political under-representation of women (Fox and Lawless 2023; Persson, Schakel, and Sundell 2024; Thomsen and King 2020). In particular, women are significantly less likely to run for office than their male counterparts. Such disparities have important implications. Indeed, more women holding office is linked with greater attention to issues such as education, childcare, and abortion (Funk and Philips 2019; Swers 2001), as well as more collaborative

and productive lawmaking (Holman, Mahoney, and Hurler 2022; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). More broadly, a dearth of female politicians can, via diminished descriptive representation, and thus a lack of attention to women's lived experiences, undermine the legitimacy of policy decisions (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019; Mansbridge 1999).[1]

Given the importance of this topic, a vast and insightful literature (primarily, but not exclusively, in the US) has focused on reasons why women do not run for office (e.g., Ashworth, Berry, and Bueno de Mesquita 2024). These include fears about how "ambitious women" may be perceived by voters (Bauer, Harman, and Russell 2024; Ditonto, Hamilton, and Redlawsk 2014; Saha and Weeks 2022), pre-adult socialization processes that reinforce the idea that politics is a "man's domain" (Bos et al. 2022; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2024; Fox and Lawless 2014), women's self-doubt regarding their qualifications (Bauer 2020; Fox and Lawless 2011; Fox and Pate 2023), women's aversion to the competitive nature of elections and politics (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece, and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016), and greater unwillingness, be this real or perceived, of political parties to actively recruit and support female candidacies (Butler and Preece 2016; Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Fox and Lawless 2010; Thomsen and Swers 2017). Relatedly, studies have, often via experiments that vary exposure to stimuli such as media depictions of gender discrimination, portrayals of women lacking political power, and/or signals from elites about the importance of electing more women, considered ways to address this (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2023; Haraldsson 2022; Karpowitz, Monson, and Preece 2017).

However, even absent such experimental treatments, a non-trivial number of women are politically ambitious and opt to run for office. Indeed, we know far less about why some women, particularly those in the general population, ultimately do run for office (but see, e.g., Crowder-Meyer 2020), relative to, for example, why women exhibit less political ambition than their male counterparts. I contribute to this literature by focusing here on labor union membership, arguing that it is an important, and heretofore, under-explored factor that can spur women's political ambition and their likelihood of running for office.[2]

I advance a theory of labor unions as a source of political ambition and test this among women, who, as previously noted, are significantly less likely to run for office than their male counterparts. I also conduct my main empirical tests among women, rather than among the full population. I do so because of the importance of gender disparities (in political ambition) for representative democracy and public policy, and because of a long-standing scholarly interest in understanding the drivers of women's political ambition (or lack thereof).

I test this relationship in the United States, a country where considerable progress has been made, but also one in which gender disparities in political ambition and office holding remain. I do so primarily with data from the 2010–22 Cooperative Election Studies (CES), a large-scale nationally representative internet survey of the American mass public that contains several hundred thousand observations. These data thus permit statistically valid tests of an infrequent outcome — running for political office.

Overall, I find evidence of a positive and substantively significant relationship between labor union membership and women's likelihood of having run for

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political office. These findings contribute to the literature by focusing more attention on why some women do run for office, rather than on why many women abstain from doing so. They also help us to better understand the factors that promote political ambition and office-seeking among ordinary women (Crowder-Meyer 2020), meaning members of the general population rather than among individuals in elite occupations (Fox and Lawless 2005). They also underscore the mass-level political consequences of labor unions in the United States, a diminished, but still relevant organization in American politics.

Labor Unions as a Source of Political Ambition

I argue that there are several potential mechanisms through which labor unions can promote office-seeking behavior. These include myriad opportunities to develop civic skills and a stronger sense of political efficacy, as well as explicit recruitment efforts by union leadership organizations. I do not view unions as solely promoting office-seeking behavior via one mechanism over another; indeed, both a sense of self-confidence in one's abilities and qualifications (e.g., Lawless and Fox 2010) as well as recruitment efforts and encouragement to run (e.g., Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013) are important drivers of whether women (my population of interest), seek to run for office. Rather, I merely seek to articulate several plausible mechanisms.

Importantly, I do not view labor unions' ability to facilitate political ambition, and by extension, office-seeking behavior, as being confined to women, nor do I seek to advance a specific "gendered" theory. Rather, I argue that labor unions should be able to promote political ambition in general and seek to test this among women, a group that has long been underrepresented among those individuals who seek and win office in the United States. This approach is not dissimilar from a recent paper that focuses on the mass-level political consequences of labor unions in the United States (Macdonald 2021b). In that paper, the author examines the relationship between labor union affiliation and partisanship among white Americans. He specifically does this by advancing a theoretical argument, one that applies to Americans broadly, linking labor union affiliation with Democratic Party support and applies it to white people. In a similar vein, I advance a general theoretical argument about how labor unions can serve as a source of political ambition, and by extension lead people to run for office, and apply it to women in the United States.

Labor unions exist (in theory) to increase the wages, benefits, and bargaining power of the working classes, relative to the management class and business interests (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Lichtenstein 2002; Rosenfeld 2014). In pursuing these aforementioned objectives, the extent to which they are successful in achieving them notwithstanding, labor unions seek to attain political power. In doing so, labor unions frequently communicate with and mobilize their rank-and-file membership (e.g., Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Flavin and Radcliff 2011; Kerrissey and Schofer 2018). This can occur throughout the course of high-profile electoral campaigns as unions seek to ensure that their supporters "vote the party line," as well as on a more daily basis, including via formal meetings,

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informal discussions, and various communications from leadership to the rank-and-file — for example, newsletters, emails, text messages, etc. (e.g., Macdonald 2021a).

These various machinations mean that union-affiliated individuals are, relative to their non union-affiliated counterparts, more likely to be exposed to an environment that can foster political ambition. I argue that this can occur through various mechanisms, including more frequent opportunities to develop civic skills, direct appeals from leadership to vote during election years, and efforts by labor unions to specifically recruit and support potential candidates, among their membership, for elected office. While these are certainly not the only ways through which labor unions can cultivate political ambition among their membership, they are certainly plausible avenues through which this can occur. This theoretical argument and the various associated mechanisms also jibe with and build upon work by Kerrissey and Schofer (2013, 898) who write that "unions intentionally cultivate organizational and civic skills among their members as a means to achieve both organizational and political goals." This argument is also consistent with more recent work by Lyon, Hemphill, and Jacobsen (2024, 228) who write that "a member's individual political awareness, ambition, and support develops as unions pursue their own organizational interests."

In a report for the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), Hertel-Fernandez (2020) argues that the workplace remains an important place for people to learn and practice civic skills and suggests that these opportunities are more likely to be present for union members. Indeed, data from an associated survey, the 2019 Workplace Political Participation Study, shows that 46% of non unionized workers report ever having "engaged in public speaking" compared to 56% of unionized workers. The differences are broadly similar for several other activities, including: "convincing others of an argument" (47% non union vs. 56% union), "managing a team" (52% non union vs. 64% union), and "fundraising or asking people for money" (21% non union vs. 46% union). Indeed, Hertel-Fernandez (2020, 3) further writes that "when workers exercise voice and input on the job, workers should gain a greater interest in doing so outside of the workplace in politics." This echoes work by Budd, Lamare, and Timming (2018), who found, examining survey data from 27 European countries, a positive relationship between participation in decision-making in the workplace and broader political engagement. Such findings are consistent with classic scholarship by Pateman (1970), who emphasized the potential of the workplace to promote political efficacy, as well as with the resource model of political participation (Brady, Verba, and Scholzman 1995), which identifies labor unions as the type of organization that can cultivate the civic skills necessary for political efficacy and engagement, and by extension, I argue, whether one develops the political ambition necessary to ultimately run for elected office.

In a study of Latino immigrant members of a janitors' labor union (SEIU Local 1877) in Los Angeles, California, Terriquez (2011) finds that participation in union activities gave people the confidence and skills to participate in other activities outside of the union setting. This specifically included greater involvement in local education — for example, engaging in fundraising for school building

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improvements and voicing their opinions in parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings, something that otherwise similar non union-affiliated individuals were less likely to do. Terriquez attributes these findings to this labor union's efforts to mobilize its membership for demonstrations, rallies, and protests, in addition to meetings run by union stewards that facilitated discussions and "collective problem solving around shared grievances or other workplace concerns" (Terriquez 2011, 587). Terriquez also differentiates between "active" and "inactive" union members, finding that both groups were approximately as likely to participate in "plug-in" school activities that allow for more passive engagement, such as attending a school event where their child participated, attending a PTA meeting, and volunteering at their child's school, but that "active" union members were significantly more likely to participate in "critical engagement" activities such as attending advisory meetings where parents helped make decisions about their children's schools, and participating in a community meeting where people discussed the need to improve local public schools. Indeed, one woman in an open-ended interview said, "it [the union] has given me confidence, it has helped me defend myself and speak to other people," while another woman said, "the union has helped me a lot, it's helped me take charge when something's wrong at the school," and a third woman said, "the union teaches you how to work with others to resolve problems." In short, Terriquez's study, although not nationally representative, illustrates, in great depth, how labor unions have the potential to foster civic skills, alleviate the burdens of engaging in costly forms of participation, and, by extension, I argue, potentially fostering the kind of political ambition that could eventually lead someone to consider running for office.

Labor unions can also foster political ambition more directly, by recruiting members to run for office and supporting them when they do so. Indeed, one of the simplest reasons why people abstain from political participation is because "nobody asked" (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). This should be especially true given the extraordinary costs of running for office. Accordingly, the AFL-CIO, the largest labor union organization in the United States, has, potentially recognizing the benefits of having more people in office with ties to organized labor, stepped up its efforts to do so — that is, to recruit and support more union-affiliated candidates (Terkel 2019).[3]

Lyon, Hemphill, and Jacobsen (2024) illustrate these dynamics in-depth, via 32 interviews with teacher candidates for state office in the 2018 US midterm elections (half of whom were women). They find that teachers' unions acted, via their bargaining activities and electoral mobilization efforts, as "schools of democracy" for these individuals by promoting (1) greater political awareness and information, (2) a sense of political efficacy and belief that running for office is neither impossible nor implausible, and (3) material resources, including formal training and financial support, for these individuals. Indeed, one teacher in this study said, "I would say being on the local union district council made running for political office more plausible for me. It made it something that wasn't out of reach." In short, Lyon, Hemphill, and Jacobsen's study, its lack of a nationally representative sample aside, is insightful and strongly suggestive of labor unions' capacity to foster political ambition.

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Testing Potential Mechanisms

In Table 1, I test two potential mechanisms through which labor union membership and office-seeking behavior may be linked. I do so by using data from a University of Houston module on the 2018 CES (total N = 1,000). I regress two dependent variables, each reflecting a potential mechanism, on a measure of labor union membership (never vs. former/current) and a small set of

Table 1. Potential mechanisms linking union membership and running for office

	Suggested to run for office			Feel qualified to run for office		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ever a union member	0.481***	0.368***	0.303**	0.447***	0.245***	0.282**
	(0.098)	(0.102)	(0.139)	(0.087)	(0.091)	(0.131)
Female		−0.364***	−0.404***		−0.538***	−0.519***
		(0.092)	(0.109)		(0.079)	(0.092)
Ever union × female			0.139			−0.072
			(0.201)			(0.180)
Age		0.002	0.002		0.010***	0.010***
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.002)	(0.002)
White		0.136	0.135		−0.030	−0.029
		(0.115)	(0.115)		(0.093)	(0.093)
Four year degree		0.268**	0.266**		0.642***	0.643***
		(0.108)	(0.108)		(0.091)	(0.091)
Graduate degree		0.639***	0.632***		1.141***	1.145***
		(0.129)	(0.129)		(0.136)	(0.136)
Constant cut1				0.049	0.394***	0.406***
				(0.045)	(0.136)	(0.138)
Constant cut2				0.501***	0.912***	0.924***
				(0.047)	(0.138)	(0.140)
Constant	−0.856***	−0.983***	−0.959***			
	(0.052)	(0.168)	(0.170)			
Observations	998	998	998	993	993	993
Pseudo R^2	0.022	0.069	0.070	0.013	0.105	0.105

Note: Dependent variables are whether someone suggested the respondent run for office (0 = no; 1 = yes) and whether respondents feel qualified to run for office (1 = disagree; 2 = neutral; 3 = agree). Models 1–3 show probit coefficients. Models 4–6 show ordered probit coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
Source: A team module from the University of Houston (total N = 1,000) on the 2018 CES.
*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1, two-tailed test.

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demographic controls, including gender. I also interact union membership (never vs. former/current) and gender (male vs. female) in order to test whether these mechanisms significantly differ across men and women.

Overall, the results in Table 1 show that union membership is significantly associated with whether anyone in a respondent's life suggested that they consider running for office, implying a potential "recruitment" mechanism, and significantly associated with whether respondents personally feel qualified to run for political office, implying a potential "civic skill" and/or "political efficacy" mechanism. Moreover, this is true among both men and women, suggesting that the mechanisms linking union membership and running for office operate similarly across the general (US) population.

Collectively, the arguments and findings of past work, combined with the results in Table 1 support my broader theoretical argument — that is, that labor union membership has the potential to, via the cultivation of civic skills and various forms of direct political mobilization, foster political ambition, and, by extension, increase people's likelihood of running for elected office. I focus here on the potential for labor unions to do this among women in the United States, given scholarly interest in the long-standing gender gap in political ambition and the continued under-representation of women in elected office.

Preliminary Evidence

In Table 2, I provide an initial and preliminary test of my hypothesis. If, as I argue, labor unions can act as a viable source of political ambition, then we should observe statistically significant mean differences in the probability of having run for office among people who have been a labor union member versus among people without such affiliation. I test this with survey data from the 2010–22 Cooperative Election Studies (CES).[4]

These data, which span a consequential period in American politics, are uniquely valuable because they ask an exceptionally large nationally representative sample of Americans (more than 300,000) whether they have ever run for elected office and ask about both current and former union membership. This

Table 2. Mean differences in having ever run for elective office by gender and labor union affiliation, 2010–22

	Ever run for elective office? (%)				
	Never in a union		Ever in a union	Difference	Pct change
Men	4.01	→	6.25	2.24***	55.9%
Women	2.33	→	4.06	1.73***	74.2%

Note: Shows the percentage of respondents who report ever having run for elective office, split by gender and labor union affiliation, survey weights applied. The "Difference" column shows the absolute change (never in a union → ever in a union) for men and women while the "Pct Change" column shows the percent change (never in union → ever in a union) for men and women. Total N = 345,980.
Source: The 2010–22 CES, survey weights applied.
*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1, two-tailed test.

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large sample size is important here because (1) a distinct minority of the US mass public are union members (e.g., Rosenfeld 2014), and (2) because even fewer people (less than 5%) choose to run for office (e.g., Motel 2014). As such, this sample size permits statistically valid tests of the relationship between labor union membership and the decision to run for office.[5] Moreover, these CES data permit me to specifically test this relationship among women in the United States. I do so here because of long-standing scholarly interest in the sources of women's political ambition (or lack thereof), along with the political importance — for example, for descriptive representation and substantive issue attention — that results from women being less likely to running for political office.

In Table 2, I compare mean differences in having ever run for office (0 = no; 1 = yes), split by respondents' labor union affiliation (0 = never a member; 1 = current/former member) and gender (0 = male; 1 = female). Overall, the results in Table 2 show that labor union membership is positively and significantly associated with the probability of having ever run for office. The exact text asked of CES respondents is as follows: "Have you ever run for elective office at any level of government (local, state, or federal)?"

This is true among both men and women. More specifically, Table 2 shows that men with labor union affiliation are, on average, approximately 2.24 percentage points more likely (6.25% vs. 4.01%) to report having run for office than are their counterparts without any labor union affiliation. The analogous difference among women is approximately 1.73 percentage points (2.33% vs. 4.06%; never a union member vs. current/former union member).

While this appears to suggest that union membership matters more for men, it is important to consider these differences more carefully by focusing on percent changes in probabilities, rather than on absolute changes.[6] For instance, examining the percent change in the probability of having run for office rather than the absolute change, suggests that union membership matters for both men and women, but also that it appears to matter somewhat more for women. This is because nonunion-affiliated men have a higher baseline probability of having ever run for office (4.01%).

Data and Methods

I test my hypothesis regarding the relationship between labor union membership and women's political ambition, measured here by whether they have ever run for office, more comprehensively in Table 4 and Figure 1. I do so with survey data from the 2010–22 CES.[7] I supplement this with data from the 2010–12 CES Panel Study to help address the potential problem of self-selection, and with data from the Cumulative General Social Survey (GSS) to address concerns about unmeasured pre-adult socialization factors. I detail these additional data (the 2010–12 CES Panel Study & the Cumulative GSS) later on in the paper, and focus here on my main data source, the 2010–22 CES.[8]

The CES has been fielded online (since 2006) via YouGov, to sample of US adults. The CES is a non-probability sample, meaning that respondents are not drawn randomly from the general population. Despite this, the CES has been

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Table 3. Descriptive statistics for key variables

	Labor union affiliation				Ever run for office?		
	All	Men	Women		All	Men	Women
Never	75.8%	70.0%	81.2%	No	96.4%	95.3%	97.3%
	(302,843)	(123,205)	(179,285)		(333,138)	(147,015)	(185,878)
Former	17.6%	21.8%	13.7%	Yes	3.6%	4.7%	2.7%
	(79,975)	(48,102)	(31,822)		(13,720)	(8,504)	(5,212)
Current	6.6%	8.2%	5.0%				
	(28,039)	(15,797)	(12,209)				

Note: Shows the distribution (percentage rounded to one decimal and number of observations in parentheses) of labor union affiliation (never vs. former vs. current) and whether a respondent has ever run for political office (no vs. yes), among all CES respondents and split by gender (male vs. female).
Source: The 2010–22 CES, survey weights applied.

shown to accurately represent the demographics of the US adult population and is widely recognized as a valid data source (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013). The main advantages of the CES are, as previously noted, an exceptionally large sample size, and excellent questions for measuring my variables of interest, those being labor union affiliation, and women's political ambition.[9]

Relatively few Americans belong to a labor union and far fewer choose to run for political office. As such, it is difficult to test this relationship among the general population. However, the exceptionally large sample size permits valid tests of this relationship among the general US population, with a specific focus on women. As shown in Table 3, even though the large majority of Americans have no personal labor union affiliation, nor have ever run for office, a non-zero proportion of Americans do and have. Importantly, in a dataset with more than 300,000 respondents, these minority categories still yield a statistically valid sample size. In short, the sample size of the CES permits valid statistical tests.

Dependent Variable

This question is posed to respondents as follows: "Have you ever run for elective office at any level of government (local, state, or federal)?" I code responses to this question as follows (0 = no; 1 = yes). Consistent with existing public opinion surveys — for example, from the Pew Research Center (Motel 2014), a small percentage of people (in the CES) report ever having run for office (N = 13,720/346,908 for all respondents, with a weighted mean of 0.036 for all respondents; N = 5,212/191,090 for women, with a weighted mean of 0.027). However, the exceptionally large sample size of the 2010–22 CES means that I can overcome this limitation and reliably test the relationship between labor union membership and political ambition among women.

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Table 4. Union membership and women's likelihood of having run for office, 2010–22

	Ever run for office?		Ever run for office?	
	probit coef	std error	probit coef	std error
Never a union member (ref.)				
Former union member	0.145	(0.017)***	0.139	(0.017)***
Current union member	0.262	(0.023)***	0.254	(0.023)***
Age	0.003	(0.000)***	0.003	(0.000)***
Married	0.056	(0.014)***	0.059	(0.014)***
Homemaker	−0.202	(0.023)***	−0.202	(0.024)***
Own home	0.072	(0.015)***	0.074	(0.015)***
Have children under age 18	0.107	(0.016)***	0.107	(0.016)***
Any military affiliation	0.098	(0.013)***	0.097	(0.013)***
White (ref.)				
Black	−0.022	(0.021)	−0.061	(0.022)***
Hispanic	0.094	(0.021)***	0.082	(0.021)***
Other	0.040	(0.027)	0.042	(0.028)
Less than a four-year degree (ref.)				
Four year college degree	0.138	(0.015)***	0.131	(0.015)***
Graduate degree	0.191	(0.018)***	0.175	(0.019)***
Income less than $100,000 (ref.)				
Income at least $100,000	0.039	(0.018)**	0.036	(0.018)**
Prefer not to say income	−0.009	(0.020)	−0.002	(0.021)
Never attend church (ref.)				
Attend church occasionally	0.075	(0.016)***	0.086	(0.016)***
Attend church weekly	0.194	(0.018)***	0.215	(0.018)***
Democrat			0.073	(0.014)***
Constant	−2.256	(0.062)***	−2.283	(0.064)***
State Fixed Effects	Yes		Yes	
Year Fixed Effects	Yes		Yes	
Observations	186,407		179,388	
Pseudo R^2	0.038		0.038	

Note: Dependent variable is whether a respondent reports having ever run for political office (0 = no; 1 = yes). The (ref.) abbreviation indicates the omitted reference category for various independent variables. Probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.
Source: The 2010–22 CES.
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, two-tailed test.

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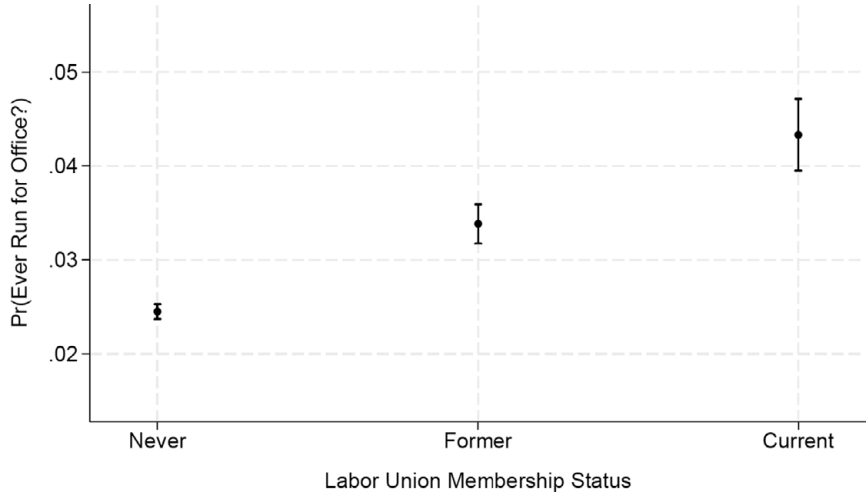

Figure 1. Labor union membership status and women's probability of having ever run for elective office, 2010–22.

Note: Shows the probability of having ever run for office (0 = no; 1 = yes) by labor union membership status. Sample is restricted to women (gender = female). Based on a probit regression model that also controls for: age, race, education, family income, marital status, employment status, home ownership, parenthood, church attendance, military affiliation, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. All of these control variables are held constant at their observed values. Point estimates are predicted probabilities; bars are 95% confidence intervals (robust standard errors, two-tailed test).

Source: The 2010–22 Cumulative CES (even years only). N = 186,407. Based on the regression model in the first column of Table 4.

While there are numerous ways to potentially measure the concept of political ambition, such as questions about whether someone would consider running for office and/or if they feel qualified to do so, I argue for a focus on whether people actually report having run for office. One reason for doing so is because this was the only appropriate question included in the CES. But beyond data availability motivations, I argue that this question is valuable because it reflects the behavior — running for office — that is of interest to scholars and political observers, rather than the attitudes that may underlie such behavior.[10]

Main Independent Variable

My main independent variable of interest is a measure of labor union membership. While it seems likely that the relationship between labor union membership and office-seeking will be strongest among women who are current labor union members (Lyon, Hemphill, and Jacobsen 2024), it is also plausible that, owing to the civic skills people can pick up in labor unions (Hertel-Fernandez 2020; Terriquez 2011), and assuming that such skill development does not substantially atrophy after leaving a union, combined with former union members being contacted during electoral mobilization efforts (e.g., Asher et al. 2001; Flavin and Radcliff 2011; Lyon and Schaffner 2021), that women who are former

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union members may also be more likely to have run for office than their never-unionized counterparts.

As such, for my main analysis, I examine the relationship between different types of union membership (never vs. former vs. current) and women's probability of having ever run for office. I specifically code this variable as follows (base category = never a union member vs. former union member vs. current union member) and treat it as a categorical variable in my main regression model.

Control Variables

To help mitigate omitted variable biases, I include a battery of relevant demographics that may correlate with both women's labor union membership and whether they have ever run for political office.[11] I specifically control for age (in years) and racial/ethnic identity (White vs. Black vs. Hispanic vs. other) to help account for general life experiences and socialization processes — that is, important factors that shape how people experience the world. I also account for socioeconomic status, an important correlate of political engagement and participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Leighley and Nagler 2014), as well as of the more costly and time-intensive decision to seek office (Crowder-Meyer 2020), by accounting for the following factors: family income (less than $100,000 vs. at least $100,000 vs. a "prefer not to say" option), formal education (less than a four-year college degree vs. four-year college degree vs. graduate degree), and home ownership (own vs. not). In particular, formal education can be a way of accounting for respondents' occupation and whether women belong to a private versus public sector union (e.g., Rosenfeld 2010). This can help to control, albeit imperfectly, for whether respondents are affiliated with an especially active and well-organized labor union, such as those representing teachers (Hartney 2022).

Additionally, I account for factors that may shape the extent to which women have household responsibilities that may preclude them from running for office (Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Silbermann 2015). I do so here by controlling for whether female CES respondents are homemakers (vs. not), whether they are married (no vs. yes), and whether they have any young children at home (no vs. yes). Finally, I control for frequency of church attendance (never vs. occasionally, but less than once per week vs. at least once a week) to help account for general participatory behavior and membership in an organization that may also promote political engagement and the development of civic skills (Djupe and Gilbert 2006), and whether a respondent has personally served in the military or resides in a household with someone who has (no vs. yes), given that such individuals may be more likely to overcome barriers — for example, questions about leadership ability — that women candidates may face when running for office (Schroeder, Best, and Teigen 2023).

Beyond these various demographics, I also include state fixed effects (dummy variables for each respondent's state of residence) and year fixed effects (dummy variables for each survey year). State fixed effects help to account for factors such as women being systematically more likely to run for political office in

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states where there are more high-profile female politicians (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018).

Year fixed effects not only control for whether a survey was conducted during a midterm or presidential election year, but also help to account for national-level factors, such as Hillary Clinton's 2016 nomination as the first woman to head a major-party presidential ticket, the feminist backlash to Donald Trump's 2016 election (DeMora et al. 2023), Kamala Harris's 2020 election as the country's first female vice president (Greene, Matos, and Sanbonmatsu 2022), as well as the salience of abortion — for example, following the US Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* that repealed the guarantee of abortion rights provided by *Roe v. Wade* (Clark et al. 2024; VanSickle-Ward et al. 2023), that may have potentially encouraged women to engage in the political process and/or to consider running for office.

Main Results

In Table 4, I present the results from my main probit regression model. This model, which uses 2010–22 CES data and solely examines women, regresses my dependent variable of having ever run for political office (0 = no; 1 = yes) on a categorical measure of labor union membership (base category = never a member vs. former union member vs. current union member), and the aforementioned set of control variables. Overall, I find that labor union membership, both current and former, is significantly associated with having run for political office. Indeed, the magnitude of this relationship is also substantively significant, with the "effect" of union membership (relative to the base category of never having been a member) approximating the "effect size" of formal education, a well-established determinant of political interest, participation, and ambition. Importantly, the relationship between labor union membership and running for political office (among women) holds (see the third/fourth columns of Table 4) even when accounting for Democratic partisanship (Democrat vs. Republican/Independent), something that may correlate with both labor union membership (e.g., Macdonald 2021b) and whether women are recruited and/or choose to run for office (e.g., Karpowitz et al. 2024).

Given that probit coefficients are not directly interpretable, I present predicted probabilities (based on the first model in columns one/two in Table 4) for my main variables of interest in Figure 1. Overall, these results show, on average, holding the control variables constant, that women who report never having been a labor union member have an approximately 2.45% probability of having ever run for office. This increases to approximately 3.39% among women who were former members, and to approximately 4.33%, among women who are current labor union members. While running for elective political office is quite uncommon, particularly among women in the general population, the likelihood of doing so is, net of a battery of sociodemographic factors, significantly higher with labor union affiliation than without. In short, running for office is, particularly for women, an uncommon activity. Labor union membership appears to make it more commonplace.

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What about Men?

As previously discussed, I view my theoretical argument linking labor union membership and political ambition as applying broadly, but seek to test it among women, given this group's long-standing under-representation in American politics and scholarly interest in understanding reasons for this phenomenon. That said, it is still interesting and worthwhile to test the relationship between labor union membership and office-seeking behavior among men in order to more fully test whether labor union affiliations can spur political ambition broadly, and whether it disproportionately benefits one gender over another.

In the Supplemental Appendix (see Table B3), I replicate my main analyses (the same design and variables as in the first/second column of Table 4) among men, using data from the 2010–22 CES. Overall, I find that the relationship between labor union membership and running for office is statistically and substantively significant among men. In terms of the "effect sizes," I find, similarly to my preliminary analyses, that the relationship (between union membership and running for office) is slightly larger in absolute terms among men (vs. women), but when measured in percent changes, is slightly larger among women (vs. men), owing in part to their lower baseline probability of seeking office. In short, my main analyses focus, for good reason, on women's political ambition, but it is worth noting that labor unions also appear capable of spurring office-seeking behavior among men.

Heterogeneity in the Relationship

In Figure 2, I test whether the observed relationship between labor union membership and women's likelihood of ever having run for office is conditioned by educational attainment, a factor that powerfully shapes how people perceive and experience the socio-political world. I specifically differentiate between women with less than a four-year college degree versus women with a four-year college degree or higher.[12]

I do so because formal education is a powerful correlate of political participation in general (e.g., Willeck and Mendelberg 2022), and because the drivers of political ambition among women can be conditioned by their level of education (Crowder-Meyer 2020). Furthermore, formal education serves as a proxy measure for the type of labor union — for example, private versus. public — to which someone might belong (e.g., Macdonald 2021b). As such, this provides a way of testing, albeit imperfectly, whether public sector unions, which tend to be comprised of more highly educated individuals (e.g., Rosenfeld 2010), are significantly better able to foster political ambition and office-seeking behavior among their (female) membership, or whether the opposite is true, and private sector unions, which tend to be comprised of less highly educated individuals, are better able to foster political ambition among women.

Moreover, testing whether labor union membership predominantly spurs office-seeking and political ambition (among women) in highest educational strata versus among the majority who have less than a four-year college degree, could also have implications for whether political agendas tilt more in favor of

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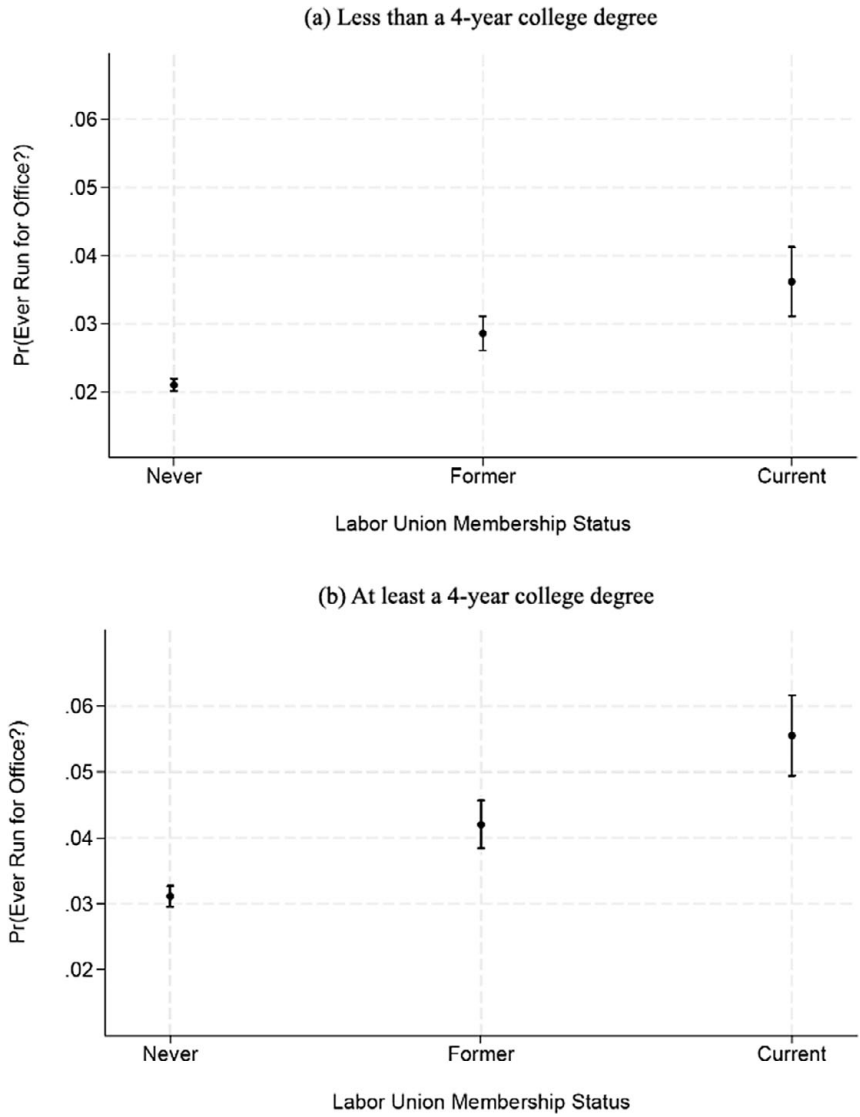

Figure 2. Labor union membership, educational attainment, and women's probability of ever having run for elective office, 2010–22.

Note: Shows the probability of having ever run for office (0 = no; 1 = yes) by labor union membership status and educational attainment. Sample is restricted to women (gender = female). Based on two probit regression models, both of which also control for: age, race, education, family income, marital status, employment status, home ownership, parenthood, church attendance, military affiliation, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. For both models, all control variables are held constant at their observed values. Point estimates are predicted probabilities; bars are 95% confidence intervals (robust standard errors, two-tailed test).

Source: The 2010–22 Cumulative CES (even years only). N = 120,941 (Less than a four-year degree); N = 65,466 (At least a four-year degree). See Appendix Table B1 for the full models.

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the less affluent "blue-collar" class, relative to the more affluent, and politically dominant, "white-collar" class (Carnes 2013).

One possibility is that more highly-educated women belong to the types of labor unions — for example, those representing teachers — that are highly active, engage in frequently mobilization efforts, and meaningfully impart civic skills, all of which can, I argue, foster political ambition, and potentially spur a run for office. As such, the link between union membership and running for office could be stronger among such women, relative to their counterparts with less formal education. Alternatively, it could be the case that labor union membership makes more of a difference in terms of cultivating political ambition and facilitating office-seeking for women with less formal education due to such individuals otherwise feeling less politically ambitious and more apprehensive about running for office, potentially as a result of lower political knowledge, interest, and/or efficacy (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997).

I test these competing possibilities in Figures 2a and 2b, presenting results from two probit models. The first consists of women with less than a four-year college degree and the second consists of women with a four-year college degree or higher. In both models, I regress my dependent variable of whether (female) respondents have ever run for office (0 = no; 1 = yes) on labor union membership (base category of never vs. former membership vs. current membership), and the same set of control variables as in my main analyses (Figure 1).

Overall, the results in Figure 2 show that the relationship (among women) between union membership and having ever run for political office is positive and statistically significant across the educational divide, even though, as expected, more (less) well-educated women have a higher (lower) baseline probability of running for office. For women with less than a four-year college degree (Figure 2a), labor union membership is, net of a battery of control variables, associated with a statistically significant increase in the probability of ever having run for office, from 2.11% (never a member), to 2.85% (former member), to 3.57% (current member). For women with a four-year college degree or higher (Figure 2b), labor union membership is similarly associated (positively and significantly) with having ever run for office, from 3.11% (never a member), to 4.20% (former member), to 5.63% (current member).

In short, the results in Figure 2 suggest that labor unions appear to matter broadly — for example, not solely in the comparatively well-organized and powerful public sector (here, proxied via college education) — and that union membership has the potential to foster political ambition and spur office-seeking for women writ large, not just among a select few.[13]

This can matter because more women running for political office with a labor and/or "working-class" background can add to legislative diversity and help to re-shape ideas about "who belongs" in political office (Barnes and Holman 2020) and affect the kinds of issues that are considered and ultimately enacted by policymakers (Barnes, Beall, and Holman 2021). This could also yield a "feedback" effect, with an increase in "the working class's share" of elected offices helping to boost political efficacy among non-affluent members of the mass public, particularly among working-class women (Kweon 2024). Of course, this might be difficult to achieve given that working-class candidates, particularly women,

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appear to face an electoral penalty (Kim and Kweon 2024; Matthews and Kerevel 2022; but see Carnes and Lupu 2016), but it seems likely, based on the findings here, that stronger and more prevalent labor unions could help make progress on these fronts.

Addressing Self-Selection and Reverse Causality

Thus far, I have demonstrated a robust and statistically significant relationship between labor union membership and women's likelihood of running for office. However, it is possible that the relationship actually goes in the opposite direction — that is, that politically ambitious individuals "select into" labor unions, rather than, as I have argued, labor union membership promoting political ambition. I test this in Table 5 with panel data from the 2010–12 CES, meaning that the same individuals are interviewed at multiple points in time.

My dependent variable here is whether respondents joined a labor union between 2010 and 2012 or whether they remained a non-member during this time period. As such, this variable is coded "1" if respondents reported that they were "never" a union member in 2010, but that they were a "current" union member in 2012. It is coded "0" if respondents reported that they were "never" a union member in both 2010 and 2012.[14] My main independent variable of interest is whether respondents reported having ever run for elected office when they were interviewed in 2010 (0 = no; 1 = yes); importantly this is measured before any potential change (never → current) in people's labor union membership.[15]

Overall, the results in Table 5 show that prior office-seeking is not significantly associated with the decision to join a labor union. This is true among all respondents, among men, and among women, my population of

Table 5. Testing whether people who previously ran for office are more likely to join a labor union vs. remain a non-member, 2010–12

	Joined a labor union? (2012)		
	All	Men	Women
Ever run for office? (2010)	0.005	0.002	0.010
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.012)
Observations	11,938	5,462	6,476
R^2	0.000	0.000	0.000

Note: Shows the relationship between having ever run for political office (0 = no; 1 = yes) and the decision to join a labor union vs. remain a non-member (0 = never a union member in both 2010 and 2012; 1 = joined a union between 2010 and 2012), by gender. Constant terms are not displayed here. OLS coefficients from three linear probability regression models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Probit models yield very similar results.
Source: The 2010–12 CES Panel Study.
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, two-tailed test.

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interest here. This is evidenced by the substantively small and statistically non-significant coefficients. In short, these results suggest that my main findings are unlikely to simply be driven by "self-selection." Rather, I argue, there appears to be something about labor union membership that matters for political ambition.

Accounting for Pre-Adult Socialization Factors

Thus far, I have demonstrated a substantively significant relationship between labor union membership and women's decision to run for office. I have also made efforts to rule out potential threats to inference. However, even despite a battery of controls to address omitted variable bias and panel data to address self-selection bias, it is possible that any observed relationship between labor union membership and women's likelihood of running for office is being driven by pre-adult socialization factors that I cannot (in the CES) properly measure. While I cannot fully dismiss this possibility, I can attempt to address such concerns. I do so with data from the 1974–2022 Cumulative GSS.

Unlike the CES, the GSS does not include any questions about running for political office. It does, however, include a reasonable proxy. This question captures a relevant attitude that theoretically underlines women's political ambition. This is whether women or men are more emotionally suited for politics. Presumably, women who believe that women are suited for politics will also believe that it is appropriate and possible for women, potentially even themselves, to run for office. This question is posed to GSS respondents as follows: "Tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women." I code responses so that higher values indicate disagreement with this statement, and thus a belief that women are just as emotionally suited for politics as men (0 = agree men are better suited; 1 = disagree men are better suited). The GSS also asks a variety of demographic questions, including about respondents' labor union membership (0 = not a current member; 1 = current member) and has, when pooling across years, a sufficiently large sample size to examine variation in beliefs among female respondents, about whether they think women are, as a group, emotionally suited for political office.

Moreover, and most relevant here, the GSS also includes questions to measure pre-adult socialization, asking several questions about respondents' upbringing. I focus on two here, both of which ask respondents about their mothers, specifically their level of formal education and work history. I re-code responses to both questions to be dichotomous (0 = mother has no post-high school education; 1 = mother has post-high school education & 0 = mother has never worked outside the home; 1 = mother has worked outside of the home).

My assumption is that women whose mothers worked and/or who had any post-high school education, would be more likely to have had a female role model who signaled that life outside of the home is both appropriate and possible for

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women (e.g., Dryler 1988). In short, such an upbringing, which I cannot measure in the CES, might be what is driving contemporary women's decision to both join a labor union and to run for office. If this is the case, then we should observe that the relationship between labor union membership and women's political ambition will go from being positive and statistically significant to being null, or at least reduced substantially, when controlling for pre-adult socialization factors, measured here via their mothers' work and education histories. I test this in Table 6, using data from the 1974–2022 Cumulative GSS.

Overall, the results in Table 6 show that the relationship between labor union membership and political ambition among women remains positive and statistically significant even when controlling for characteristics about respondents' mothers, which are intended to capture a relevant aspect of women's upbringing. Indeed, the coefficient for union membership is only slightly attenuated when accounting for these pre-adult socialization variables, and its effect size does not significantly differ across the model specifications. This is true even when controlling for year fixed effects, which can help account for changing societal norms regarding women and politics.

In short, the results in Table 6 suggest that the observed relationship between labor union membership and women's political ambition seems unlikely to simply be driven by female respondents' upbringing. Rather, labor union membership in and of itself appears to matter for women's political ambition.[16]

Table 6. Labor union membership, pre-adult socialization, and women's belief that they are emotionally suited for political office, 1974–2022

	DV = Women suited for politics			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Labor union membership	0.086***	0.086***	0.081***	0.081***
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Mother has post-high school education		0.075***		0.065***
		(0.011)		(0.011)
Mother has ever worked outside the home			0.074***	0.070***
			(0.009)	(0.009)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	14,040	12,681	12,809	12,126
R^2	0.075	0.076	0.081	0.081

Note: Shows the relationship between union membership (0 = not a current member; 1 = current member) and attitudes regarding whether men and women are equally emotionally suited for politics (0 = disagree; 1 = agree). Characteristics of respondents' mothers are dichotomous (0 vs. 1). Sample is restricted to women. Constant terms are not displayed here. OLS coefficients from four linear probability models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Probit models yield very similar results.
Source: The Cumulative GSS.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, two-tailed test.

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Conclusion and Political Implications

Women's political under-representation and gender disparities in terms of who runs for and who ultimately holds elected office have long been of interest to scholars and political observers. Here, I have made a novel contribution to a robust literature on this topic. I have done so by focusing labor unions, arguing that they can fuel political ambition and promote office-seeking, testing this among women in the United States. I have also shown, via analyses of a variety of survey data, that labor union membership is linked, to a substantively significant degree, with women's likelihood of running for political office, a relationship that is highly unlikely to be driven by self-selection or omitted variable biases.

Labor union membership, unlike other demographic characteristics or personality traits that may drive women's political ambition, is something over which government has some modicum of control (Bucci 2023; Chun 2023; Murphy 2023). Indeed, the passage of new labor laws by various legislatures, and how executive branch officials choose to enforce, and judicial branches choose to interpret, such laws, can potentially "feed back" into the political system and "create new politics" (Campbell 2012; Mettler 2002), by strengthening (or weakening) organized labor. The could, in turn, incentivize (or dissuade) more working-class individuals, including women, to run for office.

For interest groups and activists seeking to mobilize the working classes and/or to spur more women to run for office, particularly among the general population, these findings suggest that such actors would do well to focus on halting and/or reversing decades of labor decline (Rosenfeld 2014). In terms of academic research, these findings suggest that we should look beyond political parties as the primary means of recruiting women to run for office (e.g., Karpowitz, Monson, and Preece 2017), recognizing that other organizations such as labor unions (Lyon, Hemphill, and Jacobsen 2024) are also capable of filling this role. By focusing on such organizations, we can better understand the drivers of political ambition and the factors that can help increase the supply of women who enter the political arena.

Future research would do well to recognize that these findings are based on data from the early 21st century United States. Comparatively, the US has, in contrast to Western Europe, for example, relatively weak labor unions. The US also lacks a quota system mandating that women and other underrepresented groups receive a certain proportion of seats, unlike, for example, various countries in Latin America and Africa. Thus, future work should carefully theorize about how such institutional variation might condition the relationship between labor union membership and women's political ambition.

Future research would also do well to move beyond the decision to run for office (vs. not), perhaps by testing whether candidates (men and women) with a labor background, behave differently — for example, in terms of the positions they take during campaigns and/or the policies they support when in elected office — than do their counterparts without such a background (Grumbach 2015; Lamare 2016). Future work would also do well to explore this relationship (between union membership and political ambition), across different offices — for example, local versus state versus federal. Future work in the United

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States would also do well to focus on how the relationship between labor union membership and political ambition may differ among White women versus women of color (e.g., Holman and Schneider 2018) and also among women who have time-consuming and stressful familial responsibilities versus those who do not (e.g., Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021). It would also be worthwhile to test this relationship across different industries and thus examine which unions are better able to promote political ambition. The CES, with its exceptionally large sample size, could be valuable for testing such questions and thus better understanding the drivers of mass-level political ambition.

Overall, these findings make several important contributions. Primarily, they help us to better understand the sources of political ambition and to consider additional ways, specifically one over which government has some modicum of control, to help ameliorate women's political under-representation in terms of running for, and by extension, holding elected office. These findings also underscore the consequences of organized labor, suggesting that labor unions matter broadly for American mass politics.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X2400045X.

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Competing interest. The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

1. For relevant reviews on such topics see Clayton (2021); Lawless (2015); Wängnerud (2009).
2. Throughout the paper, I use the terms women and female interchangeably. Both are meant to refer to individuals whose self-identified gender is female.
3. See also the AFL-CIO's formal resolution at their 2017 Convention. https://aflcio.org/resolutions/resolution-10-encouraging-union-members-run-local-public-office.
4. See the following link for further information on the CES, including the raw data, codebook, and information on sample representativeness. https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/.
5. Weighted descriptive statistics from the 2010–22 CES show that 24.2% of respondents report ever having been a union member, while 3.6% report having ever run for political office. In a typical survey, e.g., one with a few thousand respondents, such small percentages would preclude valid statistical tests. However, the sample size of the CES permits such tests, particularly among a subset of the population, here women.
6. These percent changes are calculated via the following formula: ((value 2 − value 1) ÷ value 1) × 100.
7. While the Cumulative CES does not include a question about seeking office, each even-year CES has, since 2010, asked this question. As such, I merge responses to this question (2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022) with the existing variables included in the Cumulative CES. In short, I have supplemented the Cumulative CES (and truncated it to only include even years from 2010–22) by adding a question about whether people have ever run for office.
8. See Supplemental Appendix A for detail on variable coding and creation for all data sources. I use the 2010–22 CES for my main analyses. I use data from the 2010–12 CES panel and the Cumulative GSS for additional analyses and robustness tests.

9. For example, the American National Election Studies (ANES), which is arguably the "gold standard" for studying US public opinion and political behavior, does not ask questions about running for office.
10. In a later analysis, using Cumulative GSS data, I focus on, owing to data availability but also to show that the results are not driven by one particular question, the relationship between labor union membership and women's belief that women are, as a group, not less suited for politics than are men.
11. All of these control variables (except for age) are either dichotomous (0 vs. 1) or are categorical, with one category, e.g., the lowest income bracket, representing the base category to which the other categories of each variable are compared.
12. Weighted data from the 2010–22 CES shows that 28.9% of women have a four-year college degree or higher vs. 71.1% who have less than a four-year degree. Among women who have ever been a labor union member (N = 44,031), 37.3% have a four-year degree or higher, while 62.7% have less than a four-year degree.
13. In the Supplemental Appendix (Table B2), I run an additional model that interacts (among women) labor union membership (never vs. former/current) × a three-category measure of education (less than a four-year degree vs. four-degree vs. graduate degree). Overall, the results show that union membership is significantly associated, for all three educational groups, with having run for office. This further suggests that labor union membership matters broadly, i.e., among "blue," "pink," and "white" collar women.
14. A very small number of respondents (total N = 11,970) I examined here (a) reported ever having run for office when they were interviewed in 2010 (N = 452) and (b) joined a labor union between 2010 and 2012 (N = 135). However, these numbers are not zero. These limitations aside, the 2010–12 CES panel is the best available data to provide a test of the direction of the relationship between labor union membership and office-seeking behavior.
15. Unfortunately, these data (the 2010–12 CES panel) do not permit me to formally test the reverse relationship, i.e., whether joining a labor union leads people to run for office. This is because the CES question about running for office asks whether a respondent has ever done so. As such, I simply lack the proper temporal ordering (being sure that I am measuring whether someone joined a union before deciding whether to launch an initial run for office) to properly test this relationship.
16. I do not include any other additional controls, e.g., for demographics, in my GSS analyses for two main reasons. The first is because I have already done so in my CES analyses. The second is because my objective here is simply to see whether the relationship between union membership and political ambition among women changes meaningfully when controlling for relevant gender-specific pre-adult socialization factors.

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