

# Do Mayors Run for Higher Office? New Evidence on Progressive Ambition

American Politics Research

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Katherine Levine Einstein<sup>1</sup>, David M. Glick<sup>1</sup>,  
Maxwell Palmer<sup>1</sup> , and Robert J. Pressel<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The mayor's office potentially offers a launchpad for statewide and national political ambitions. We know relatively little, however, about how frequently mayors actually run for higher office, and which mayors choose to do so. This article combines longitudinal data on the career paths of the mayors of 200 big cities with new survey and interview data to investigate these questions. While we find that individual and city traits—especially gender—have some predictive power, the overwhelming story is that relatively few mayors—just under one-fifth—ever seek higher office. We suggest that ideological, institutional, and electoral factors all help to explain why so few mayors exhibit progressive ambition.

## Keywords

American politics, local politics, mayors, progressive ambition

## Introduction

In a *Time Magazine* profile of New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, political scientist and commentator Larry Sabato cited the value of his experience as a

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<sup>1</sup>Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

<sup>2</sup>Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Maxwell Palmer, Boston University, 232 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215, USA.

Email: [mbpalmer@bu.edu](mailto:mbpalmer@bu.edu)

mayor to his progression to higher office: “When he inevitably runs for President, Booker will claim executive experience from Newark and national expertise via the Senate” (Newton-Small, 2013). Booker is not alone in thinking of local office as a first step in a national political career. Democratic presidential runner-up (and Vermont senator) Bernie Sanders and Democratic vice presidential nominee (and Virginia Senator) Tim Kaine similarly launched their political careers as mayors.

A wide body of scholarship on progressive ambition suggests that local offices are good starting points for ambitious politicians (Black, 1972; Kazez, 1994; Rohde, 1979; Schlesinger, 1966; Fox & Lawless, 2005, 2010). In describing the electoral successes of former U.S. Senator Scott Brown, Stewart (2012) succinctly outlines why these offices provide effective political launchpads: “His success derived in part from his opportunity to hone his political skills through seeking election in a series of interlocking and ever-larger constituencies” (p. 146). In their Citizen Political Ambition Survey, Fox and Lawless (2005) find that potential office-seekers are well aware of this “career ladder.” Seventy percent select a local office as their prospective first race, with between 30% and 40% of respondents indicating that they *eventually* plan to run for higher office (p. 649). Holding local office—a relatively low-cost position to obtain—should create a natural constituency for an upwardly mobile politician, and could boost his or her sense of efficacy, an important driver of the decision to run for higher office (Fox & Lawless, 2005).

Given the importance of local office as a career launchpad, a wealth of research has explored the progressive ambitions of local politicians. The bulk of this research has centered on the paths of state legislators by investigating the personal and structural factors that shape when and why they seek higher office (Fulton, Maestas, Maisel, & Stone, 2006; Maestas, 2000, 2003; Maestas, Fulton, Maisel, & Stone, 2006). Much of this literature focuses specifically on decisions about when to run for Congress, rather than higher office more generally (Maestas, 2000; Maisel & Stone, 2014; Powell, 2000; Steen, 2006; Tothero, 2003). Within the context of statehouses, this focus makes sense. State legislators are natural candidates for higher *legislative* positions. Nonetheless, by focusing on one pool of candidates—state legislators—and one particular higher office—U.S. congressional representative—this scholarship necessarily provides researchers with an incomplete picture of progressive ambition. This substantive limitation is compounded by methodological ones: these studies rely on case studies of subsets of legislators or surveys of legislators. To our knowledge, no studies of politicians (or prospective politicians) have combined survey evidence with longitudinal career path data on the full set of politicians.

To address these substantive and methodological limitations, we study the career paths of mayors by combining an original survey with historical data on the careers paths of *all* mayors of large cities. There are several reasons we might expect local politicians in *executive* positions—mayors—to have a different decision calculus in choosing whether to run for higher office. For both ideological and institutional reasons, mayors may have different policy concerns and priorities than other officials who are attracted to statewide and national office. Mayors may genuinely enjoy working on urban issues and have little interest in national ones. In his work on party politics, Sorauf (1980) notes that the American urban machine is “provincially concerned with the city, and its politics are almost completely divorced from the issues that agitate our national politics” (p. 70). Banfield and Wilson (1963) similarly contend that local parties rarely have a “concrete program or platform” (p. 277). Issue passion is an important component of the decision to seek office (Canon, 1990; Thomas, 1990; Wilson, 1962). If the issues that motivate mayors are starkly different from those that motivate governors and federal legislators, then we may not observe high levels of progressive ambition among mayors. In contrast, state legislators would naturally share state-level policy interests with governors, and, relative to the local level, state-level legislative debates more closely mirror those occurring nationally. While the partisan cleavages endemic to national politics have filtered to some extent to the local level (Einstein & Kogan, 2016; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014), they are much less prominent (Brooks & Phillips, 2010; Frug, 1980; Gamm & Kousser, 2013; Peterson, 1981; Vigdor, 2004) than at the state level (Shor & McCarty, 2011).

Second, the natural next step up (or most similar power base) for many mayors (and state legislators) is Congress. In most cases, being elected senator or governor requires appealing to a much larger state-level voting population. Unlike state legislators, mayors would have to give up executive power and autonomy to join Congress. Certain political leaders may have natural inclinations for executive positions and others for legislative ones. Or, it might be hard to give up executive power to become one of many in a potentially gridlocked legislature.

Third, mayors—as local officeholders—may be reluctant for family or life cycle reasons to move from the local stage to state or national offices. State legislators (Gaddie, 2004) and members of Congress (Theriault, 1998) stress the challenges of balancing family with these political offices. Unlike legislators, mayors do not serve in a wider governing body that requires them to spend significant time outside their own home city. This fact may make the leap to higher office—which would presumably require more time spent in their state’s capitol or Washington, D.C.—a challenging one for many

mayors. Mayors get to work in, and lead, their chosen hometowns (usually while staying in their own homes) which increases the personal opportunity cost of higher offices.

Fourth, in many cases, running for higher office would require a mayor to engage in significantly more fundraising, campaigning, and partisanship than his or her current position requires. The House of Representatives in particular is hyper-partisan and requires constant campaigning and fundraising (Hall, 2016). Unlike the factors mentioned above, this issue is not distinctive to mayors and is likely a factor for all local officeholders.

The current empirical evidence on *mayors'* career ambitions is limited and decidedly mixed. Gittell (1963) contends that mayors generally are unsuccessful in seeking election to higher offices, particularly when they attempt to campaign outside their home city. Murphy (1980), on the contrary, argues that mayors tend to perform at similar levels to those coming from other "stepping-stone" offices—particularly state legislators.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he contends that the mayoralty is frequently the culmination of a political career, a point supported by other research (McNitt, 2010). While all of these studies represent informative starting points—and yield important insights into separate research questions—they almost exclusively focus on a narrow subset of the nation's largest cities.<sup>2</sup> While case studies of these cities with unique powers (Judd & Swanstrom, 2014) are common (Kaufmann, 2004; Mollenkopf, 1994; Sonenshein, 1993), focusing on roughly 20 abnormal cities necessarily limits the power to make generalizable insights.

Moreover, these studies have largely eschewed questions about the *types* of mayors who seek higher office. We thus have little evidence on whether issues like race, gender, partisan context, and city institutional features shape mayors' propensity to run for other positions. These questions have been the subject of a wide strand of scholarship on progressive ambition in other arenas (Fox & Lawless, 2005; Lawless, 2012).

This relative lack of information about mayoral ambition has potentially important representative and policy implications. In particular, there is strong evidence that ambitious politicians behave differently than their counterparts without aspirations for higher office. At the local level, Leroux and Pandey (2014) find that ambitious city leaders are more likely to use interlocal service delivery to enhance policy efficiency. State legislators with progressive ambition are more likely to monitor constituents' opinions (Maestas, 2003), and more professionalized state legislatures yield more representative policy outcomes in part because of the opportunities they afford for career progression (Maestas, 2000).

To address these questions, we collected two different data sets. The first comprises comprehensive data on the career trajectories of all mayors who

have led cities over 150,000 people (and a systematically selected group of other large cities) since 1992. We couple these historical data with responses from a national survey of over 90 mayors of cities over 75,000 people—including many of the nation's largest cities—that explores, among other issues, mayoral career ambition. These data offer unprecedented access into the self-reported political ambitions of *elected officials* at the local level. Qualitative comments from the surveys help us elucidate proposed theoretical mechanism outlined in the next section.

Our data reveal that a low percentage of medium to big city mayors—less than one fifth—seek higher office. In other words, the former mayors who played prominent roles in the 2016 election are outliers. Mayors largely end their political careers without pursuing and/or filling higher offices. The qualitative and quantitative evidence from the survey speaks to potential political, policy, and lifestyle mechanisms and explanations introduced above. Interestingly, we also find some variation in which mayors are interested in running. Most notably, we find evidence of a gender gap driven by female mayors being less interested in pursuing higher office even as they report being recruited at similar rates to males. A mayor's race, city racial context, city population, and city institutional features all also appear to have some limited predictive power in the historical data.

## When Do Mayors Run?

Motivated by the concerns outlined above, we begin with a simple question: At what rate do mayors run for higher office? Within this broad query, however, lie additional questions about *the kinds* of mayors who exhibit progressive ambition. We turn to exploring the types of individual and contextual factors that might promote or hinder mayoral career progression. We identify two broad sets of characteristics that might help us to better understand mayoral ambition: individual and contextual.

### *Individual Characteristics*

At the individual level, a rich body of scholarship suggests that a politician's race and gender shape his or her propensity to run for higher office. In particular, ample empirical evidence reveals that being a member of underrepresented groups reduces progressive ambition (Constantini, 1990; Fox & Lawless, 2005; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Moncrief, Squire, & Jewell, 2001). There are a variety of mechanisms at play here. Given the dramatic overrepresentation of White men in the vast majority of elected bodies in the United States, women and minorities may not believe that higher office is a realistic

possibility (Fox & Lawless, 2005). Moreover, members of historically excluded populations are less likely to be recruited (Eulau & Prewitt 1973; Matthews, 1984), may feel less efficacy as candidates, and/or lack a politicized upbringing (Fox & Lawless, 2005). Taken together, this research leads us to anticipate that female, Black, and/or Hispanic mayors will be less likely to run for higher office than their White and/or male counterparts.

### *Contextual Characteristics*

In addition, a variety of city-level contextual characteristics might affect whether a mayor chooses to run for higher office. Here, we highlight three: institutional configuration, size, and racial demographics.

Most large American cities have one of two forms of government: mayor–council or council–manager. Under the mayor–council system, the mayor typically acts as an executive with a large degree of autonomy. He or she can veto city council ordinances and is responsible for appointing a wide array of critical city officials (Judd & Swanstrom, 2014). Conversely, under council–manager system the mayor and city council make policy decisions (typically with the council wielding greater authority), with a city manager taking responsibility for the day-to-day operation of government (Judd & Swanstrom, 2014). Local political offices create natural constituencies and help the progressively ambitious bolster their political skills. We thus might anticipate that mayor–council systems—which confer both greater electoral pressures and professional responsibilities on mayors—should yield more successful candidates for higher office than mayors in council–manager systems. This logic suggests that mayors governing under mayor–council systems should evince greater progressive ambition than those in council–manager cities.

On the contrary, the powers that allow for constituency and skill development might make leading in a mayor–council system more attractive than higher offices. Because they can wield greater influence and accomplish policy goals, these mayors might actually feel less frustrated in their current positions and could therefore be less inclined to pursue higher office. In addition, their positions may leave them less time to run than their council–manager counterparts.

The size of a city might similarly affect mayoral ambition. Stewart (2012) outlines why constituency size matters:

[A]t each step along the way, the constituency of the old position was a subset of the constituency at the new position. A career in elected office, therefore, often is a matter of winning a majority in a small constituency, shoring up that

constituency through diligent service, and then using the smaller constituency as a base in trying to win a larger constituency. (p.144)

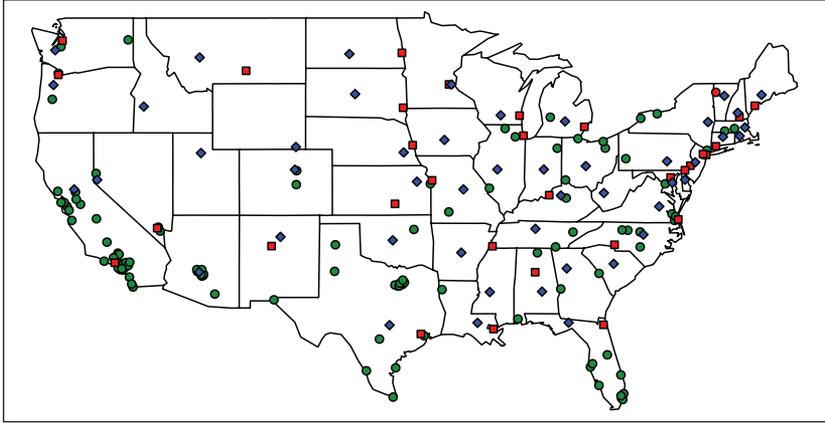
Intuitively, larger cities then should be more amenable to progressively ambitious politicians simply because they will comprise a larger share of any subsequent constituency. In addition, big city mayors face unique challenges and wield unique powers (Judd & Swanstrom, 2014). Thus, as with the mayors of mayor–council cities, the mayors of large cities will have more opportunities to develop their political skills and will likely have greater confidence in their political efficacy. Therefore, we expect that mayors of larger cities will exhibit greater progressive ambition than their counterparts governing smaller cities.

Finally, city racial demographics might shape mayoral progressive ambition. Mayors who represent a more diverse constituency might find it challenging to move to a higher office that corresponds with a Whiter voting population. Given racial/ethnic differences in policy preferences (Hochschild, Weaver, & Burch, 2012), mayors of more diverse constituencies may struggle to maintain support among their base while appealing to broader district views. Thus, we expect that mayors of cities with higher proportions of minorities will exhibit less progressive ambition than their counterparts governing Whiter cities.

## Historical Data on Mayors' Career Trajectories

We collected information for all mayors of cities with populations greater than 150,000 people (based on total population in the 2013 American Community Survey). There are 165 such cities, ranging from New York City (population 8,268,999) to Pomona, California (population 150,006). We also included the 24 state capitals that do not meet this cutoff, and an additional seven cities that are the largest in their respective states, but not already in the sample, for a total of 196 cities. For example, no city in New Hampshire exceeds 150,000 people, but we include Concord, the state capital (pop. 42,419), as well as Manchester, the largest city in the state (population 109,942).<sup>3</sup> We include the state capitals and largest city in each state to ensure that at least one significant city in each state is included. This reflects the fact that major cities are defined by their contexts. Figure 1 maps the cities in our sample.<sup>4</sup>

For each city, we gathered information on every person elected or appointed mayor from 1992 to 2015.<sup>5</sup> We collected a variety of background information, including dates of birth and death, gender, and race, along with political party (where available), and electoral/career history.<sup>6</sup> In particular,



**Figure 1.** Map of cities in sample.

Note. Diamonds indicate state capitals; squares indicate the largest city in the state (if other than the state capital). Not shown: Anchorage, AK; Juneau, AK; Honolulu, HI.

**Table 1.** Summary Statistics for Cities and Mayors.

| Cities                |         | Mayors              |       |
|-----------------------|---------|---------------------|-------|
| N                     | 191     | N                   | 695   |
| Mean population       | 385,571 | % women             | 15.54 |
| Median population     | 218,172 | % Black             | 14.10 |
| Mean mayors           | 3.61    | % Hispanic          | 6.62  |
| % strong mayor system | 49.74   | Mean tenure (years) | 6.79  |

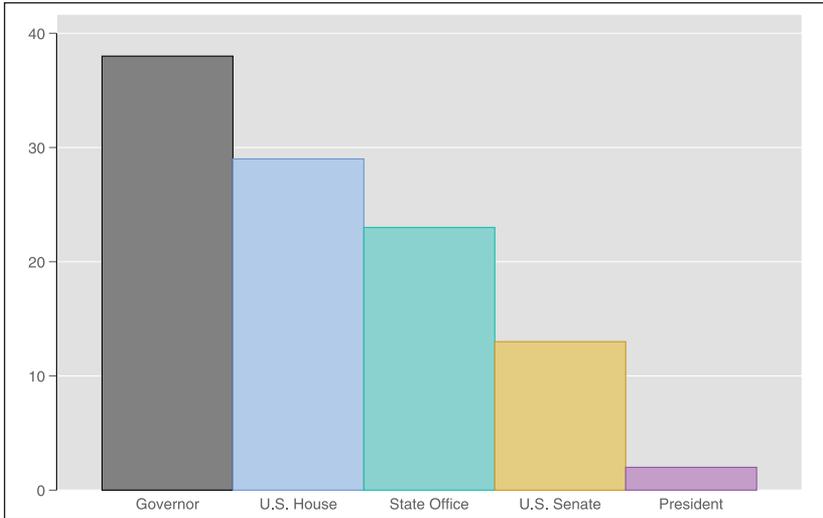
we sought to identify every elected office for which the mayor ran, both before and after serving as mayor. For example, Ed Rendell, the former mayor of Philadelphia, first won election as District Attorney in 1977. He later ran for governor (in 1986) and mayor (in 1987). In both instances, he lost in the Democratic primary. He then ran for mayor again in 1991 and won before being elected governor in 2002. While there are many offices for which a mayor could run, we focused on statewide and federal races for the main analyses (we report results on mayors seeking state legislative seats in the Online Appendix in Tables A12 and A13). We excluded other local, county, and state legislative offices, as the relative power and prestige of these offices compared with even moderately sized and powerful mayoral positions is unclear. Overall, we collected data on 695 mayors. Table 1 provides summary statistics about the cities and mayors in our sample.

We merged the mayor-level data with data on city-level demographics and institutional structures. We gathered racial and population data from the U.S. Census Bureau for the 1990, 2000, and 2010 censuses. To study each city's institutional characteristics, we performed a comprehensive survey of city charters to identify term limits, length of mayoral terms, mayoral structure (classified as either a strong or weak mayor system), and the method of selection. Most of the mayors in our sample (97%) were directly elected by the voters. A smaller subset (24) were appointed by the city council, generally from among their own ranks.<sup>7</sup>

Our dependent variable, *Candidate*, is coded as "1" if a mayor runs for a higher office after their first successful mayoral election, and "0" if they never do so, regardless of their success in actually winning higher office. This includes mayors who enter a party primary for higher office but do not win the primary.<sup>8</sup>

We begin by exploring the basic descriptive question of mayoral ambition: At what rate do mayors run for higher office?<sup>9</sup> Fifteen percent of mayors run for a higher office, and 5% ultimately win one. To offer some comparison with other offices, in 2002, only 45 of the nation's 7,500 state legislators ran for U.S. House (Maestas et al., 2006, p. 196); the proportion of mayors running is certainly higher than this figure. However, that 7,500 includes everything from part-time legislators to members of highly professionalized bodies. Moreover, a snapshot of one year and one office does not capture what these legislators' lifetime career ambitions are. Hain (1974, 1976) provides perhaps the most analogous longitudinal evidence; he interviews 473 lower chamber legislators in 1957 and tracks their career paths through 1970. He finds that 44% of these legislators ran for higher office (including the upper chamber of their state legislature)—a far greater level of progressive ambition than we find among mayors. Finally, in their survey evidence of prospective political candidates, Fox and Lawless (2005) find that 19% of mayoral candidates are interested in higher office, compared with 41% of state legislators. Our historical data appear to be in line with their survey data, suggesting, on balance that mayors of large cities exhibit relatively low levels of progressive ambition.

The number of mayors running for higher office may be especially surprising considering that we are looking at a population of previously successful politicians who hold positions that could facilitate further ambitions. Nonetheless, over the course of the 23 years and 200 cities covered by our sample, 90 mayors do seek higher office.<sup>10</sup> Figure 2 shows the number (raw counts) of mayors who ran for higher office by position. The most popular office was governor; 41% the mayors who ran for higher office ran for governor. Of all of the mayors who ran for at least one higher office, 56% ran for



**Figure 2.** Number (raw count) of mayors running for higher office.

executive offices, 34% ran for legislative offices, and 10% ran for at least one of each. This overall preference for executive positions is consistent with our prediction that mayors would largely eschew legislative positions because of their ideological nature and lack of direct governing power.

Turning toward the question of *which* mayors run for higher office, Tables 2 and 3 display ordinary least squares (OLS) coefficient estimates and standard errors from models predicting mayoral ambition based on individual-level and contextual characteristics, respectively. Each table includes two models: the first uses the entire sample of mayors, and the second restricts the sample to former mayors only.<sup>11</sup>

Starting with the individual-level model (Table 2)—which also includes control variables for the mayor’s political party—we find mixed support for the prediction that Black and Hispanic mayors would be less apt to run for higher office. Black mayors appear to be less likely to run for higher office generally. The coefficient estimates suggest that they are about nine percentage points less likely to run in a primary, all else equal. The coefficient for Hispanic ethnicity is negative, but falls well short of conventional standards for statistical significance. The results in Table 2 also yield some support for the hypothesis that female mayors would be less likely to run for higher office. The significance of the coefficient differs across the two samples, but is negative for both.

Turning to Table 3, we also evaluate a series of predictions exploring how city-level characteristics might correspond with mayoral ambition. These

**Table 2.** Individual Variables.

|                | (1)                   | (2)                   |
|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|                | All mayors            | Former mayors         |
| Female         | -0.0494<br>(0.0401)   | -0.0693<br>(0.0431)   |
| Black          | -0.0850**<br>(0.0430) | -0.0977**<br>(0.0488) |
| Hispanic       | -0.0203<br>(0.0600)   | -0.0187<br>(0.0643)   |
| Democrat       | -0.0388<br>(0.0360)   | -0.0473<br>(0.0401)   |
| Independent    | -0.201***<br>(0.0429) | -0.226***<br>(0.0465) |
| Constant       | 0.233***<br>(0.0290)  | 0.261***<br>(0.0324)  |
| Observations   | 600                   | 526                   |
| R <sup>2</sup> | .049                  | .060                  |

Note. The dependent variable is a binary indicator of whether the mayor was a candidate for higher office. Model 1 includes all mayors in the sample, and Model 2 restricts the sample to former mayors who had left office as of 2015. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

models—which feature the same dependent variable as in Table 2—include controls for whether a city has term limits and whether it is in the South, along with city and state-level percent Democratic variables.<sup>12</sup> Consistent with our prediction that mayor–council systems would foster the development of political skills, we find that, all else equal, leading a strong-mayor city increases a mayor’s probability of running in a primary by about 8 percentage points. There is a slight negative relationship between the city’s percent Black population and progressive ambition, and—in contrast with our predictions—a slight positive relationship for the percent Hispanic population, though in both cases the relationship is imprecise. Perhaps because of Hispanics’ rising salience as a swing constituency (Hochschild et al., 2012), mayors of these communities strategically believe that they have a better chance of obtaining higher office.

## Mayors’ Preferences: Survey Evidence

To better understand the key insight of our historical data—that mayors seldom run for higher office—we turn to a second novel data source: a nationally representative survey of mayors of cities over 75,000. We recruited *all*

**Table 3.** Contextual Variables.

|                       | (1)                  | (2)                  |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                       | All mayors           | Former mayors        |
| Largest city in state | 0.137***<br>(0.0347) | 0.155***<br>(0.0385) |
| State capital         | 0.0127<br>(0.0346)   | 0.00620<br>(0.0382)  |
| Strong mayor system   | 0.0816**<br>(0.0342) | 0.0956**<br>(0.0380) |
| Mayoral term limits   | 0.0281<br>(0.0310)   | 0.0279<br>(0.0341)   |
| South                 | -0.0337<br>(0.0410)  | -0.0326<br>(0.0449)  |
| % Black               | -0.0530<br>(0.117)   | -0.0785<br>(0.128)   |
| % Hispanic            | 0.131<br>(0.0835)    | 0.155*<br>(0.0938)   |
| % Dem vote in city    | 0.0232<br>(0.156)    | 0.0923<br>(0.174)    |
| % Dem vote in state   | -0.0607<br>(0.220)   | -0.218<br>(0.246)    |
| Constant              | 0.0666<br>(0.106)    | 0.113<br>(0.117)     |
| Observations          | 585                  | 510                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>        | .054                 | .066                 |

Note. The dependent variable is a binary indicator of whether the mayor was a candidate for higher office. Model 1 includes all mayors in the sample, and Model 2 restricts the sample to former mayors who had left office as of 2015. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

mayors from cities over 75,000 (465 in the United States) to participate in an in-person/phone survey on a wide array of topics. Ninety-four mayors participated—a response rate of 20%.<sup>13</sup> Table 4 compares the participating cities' traits to the total population of U.S. cities with more than 75,000 residents. In-sample mayors largely resemble the demographics of the country as a whole. The participants, however, generally skew toward bigger cities. For a study of mayoral career ambition, this skew is not especially problematic. If anything, it means that more of the mayors in our sample have thought of and/or are plausible candidates for higher office. Given the questions we are focused on, having a moderate sample size in which all or nearly all of the

**Table 4.** In Sample City Traits Versus the National Population.

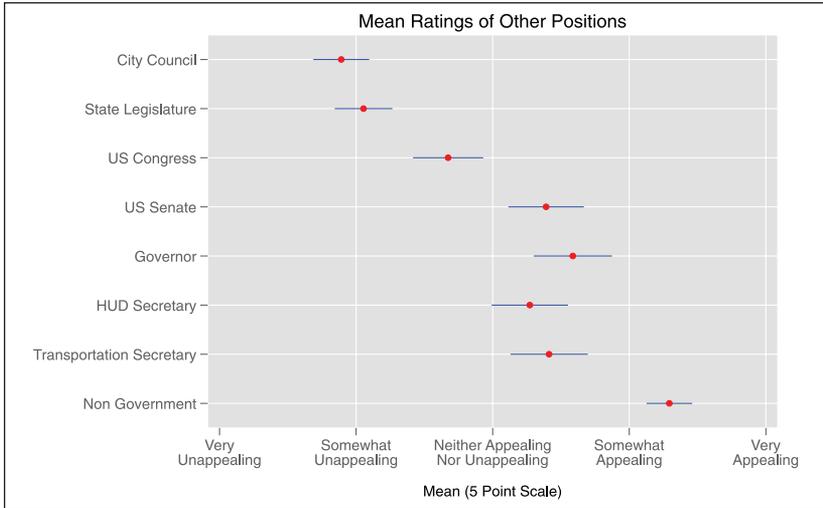
|                      | In sample | All cities over 75,000 |
|----------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| N                    | 94        | 465                    |
| Population           | 281,722   | 222,946                |
| % Black              | 18.1%     | 14.5%                  |
| % Hispanic           | 18.7%     | 24.5%                  |
| Median income        | \$50,107  | \$ 55,010              |
| Median housing price | \$193,393 | \$237,049              |
| Poverty rate         | 15.1%     | 13.5%                  |
| Unemployment rate    | 9.9%      | 10.1%                  |
| Strong mayor         | 41.0%     | 36.1%                  |

**Table 5.** Traits of Participating Mayors.

|                 |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Female          | 26% |
| Race            |     |
| White           | 79% |
| Black           | 14% |
| Hispanic        | 4%  |
| Partisanship    |     |
| Democrat        | 65% |
| Republican      | 35% |
| Highest degree  |     |
| BA/BS           | 41% |
| JD              | 31% |
| MBA             | 5%  |
| PhD             | 4%  |
| Other           | 19% |
| Years in office | 5.7 |

respondents are plausible candidates for higher office is advantageous relative to having a larger sample size with more mayors of smaller cities and towns.<sup>14</sup>

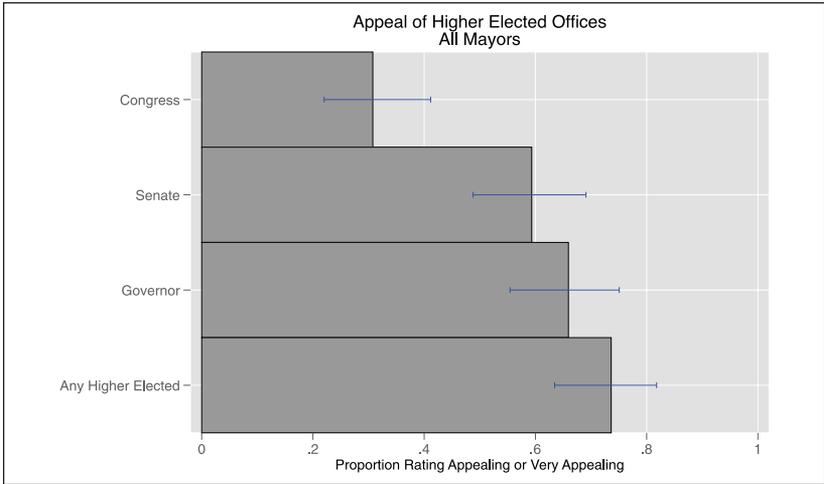
Table 5 illustrates that the participating mayors come from a variety of backgrounds. The relatively large number of female and Black mayors allows us to make comparisons along racial and gender lines. The small number of Hispanic mayors limits our ability to test for ethnicity effects. Our sample is representative along partisan lines. It is 65% Democrat and 35% Republican. These figures closely mirror the national rates in large cities (Gerber & Hopkins, 2011).



**Figure 3.** Mayors' mean ratings of the appeal of other positions.

The survey included two questions about career ambitions intermingled with items addressing a variety of topics. This wide ranging survey assures us that mayors did not opt in because of an atypical interest in discussing career trajectories. The first question asked mayors, “If you could no longer be mayor of your city, how appealing would each of the following positions be?” Mayors were then asked to rate a series of positions on a 5-point scale ranging from *very unappealing* to *very appealing*. These jobs were city councilor, state legislator, U.S. congressman/congresswoman, U.S. senator, governor, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Secretary of Transportation, and something outside of government. The second question we asked centered on recruitment. We asked “During your time as mayor, have you been seriously recruited or encouraged to run for a different political office?”

Figure 3 displays mayors' average ratings of other political offices and non-governmental work. This plot suggests two general findings: (a) Mayors are not especially enthusiastic about filling other governmental offices, and (b) to the extent they are enthusiastic, their preferences align with the influence and prestige of the other offices. Perhaps the most striking result is the appeal of nongovernmental work which was by far the highest rated option on average. Over 80% of mayors rated such jobs as “very appealing” or “appealing.” No single government job came close to matching those figures. Importantly, this lack of enthusiasm for higher office does not appear to be a consequence of



**Figure 4.** The proportion of mayors who rate higher elected offices as appealing or very appealing.

lack of encouragement. When asked whether they had been “seriously recruited” for higher office, 75% said yes. Moreover, because we conducted the interviews over the phone, we were able to, at least in some cases, determine that these recruitment efforts were credible with follow-up discussion.

Of course, at least some mayors viewed some of the higher offices as attractive. A majority of mayors viewed four of the political jobs listed—U.S. Senate, governor, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary, and Transportation Secretary—as very or somewhat appealing. Conversely, only 30% of mayors expressed similarly positive sentiments about running for U.S. Congress, and only 10% exhibited any interest in city council or state legislature. There is no evidence that mayors as a group had unusual or idiosyncratic preferences over the set of offices. We do not see, for example, evidence of a singular focus on urban issues. The two elected offices dealing with state and local issues were almost universally unattractive. Moreover, while it was generally well regarded, the position of HUD secretary, which would allow one to focus almost exclusively on city issues, did not stand out from the other appealing positions. In sum, based on the overall attractiveness ratings, it appears that mayors’ views of other government positions are rather conventional.

Figure 4 further unpacks mayors’ views toward the three elected positions that could plausibly be described as more prestigious than the mayor’s office: governor, Senate, and House. It displays the proportion of mayors who

labeled each of the three positions as either appealing or very appealing. Two aspects of the graph stand out. First, as with the more comprehensive plot in Figure 3, mayors have little interest in running for Congress. Only about one third of mayors rated Congress at least appealing, and only 5% described it as very appealing. This finding is consistent with the proposition that mayors have a distaste for the legislative process generally and that they especially revile the partisan fighting, fundraising, and frequent elections that are an integral part of running for and serving in the House. The second striking result in Figure 4 is the relative parity of the Senate and governor options. About 66% and 60% found governor and Senate appealing, respectively. These differences are not significant ( $p = .41$ ). About 72% of those that were enthusiastic about governor were also enthusiastic about Senator, and 87% of those who saw the Senate as appealing felt similarly about the governor's office.

The qualitative evidence also speaks to the proposed explanations for mayors' lack of interest in higher office. One mayor we spoke with indirectly bolstered our theory that mayors were more attracted to offices that tackled urban issues in discussing his enthusiasm about a national position like HUD Secretary. This northeastern mayor of a medium-sized city noted the attractiveness of the position because "CDBG funds [Community Development Block Grants from HUD] are a lifeline for urban mayors." In other words, he found this national position attractive at least in part because it would allow him more power and authority to work on urban issues.

Several mayors highlighted the unattractiveness of legislative positions—a qualitative sentiment that conforms with the more systematic low ratings of the U.S. Congress. One western mayor observed: "I decided a long time ago that I don't have a great legislative personality. I like to surround myself with intelligent people and have some control over that. . . . U.S. Congress, I thought about it at one time, but have decided I'd be miserable." Any mayor moving to Congress would naturally be a junior member and would be stepping down in terms of power and autonomy. Indeed, one mayor of a medium-sized southern city who had been recruited for higher office worried about his inability to accomplish policy goals, particularly because he would "have to wait so long to move up in seniority."

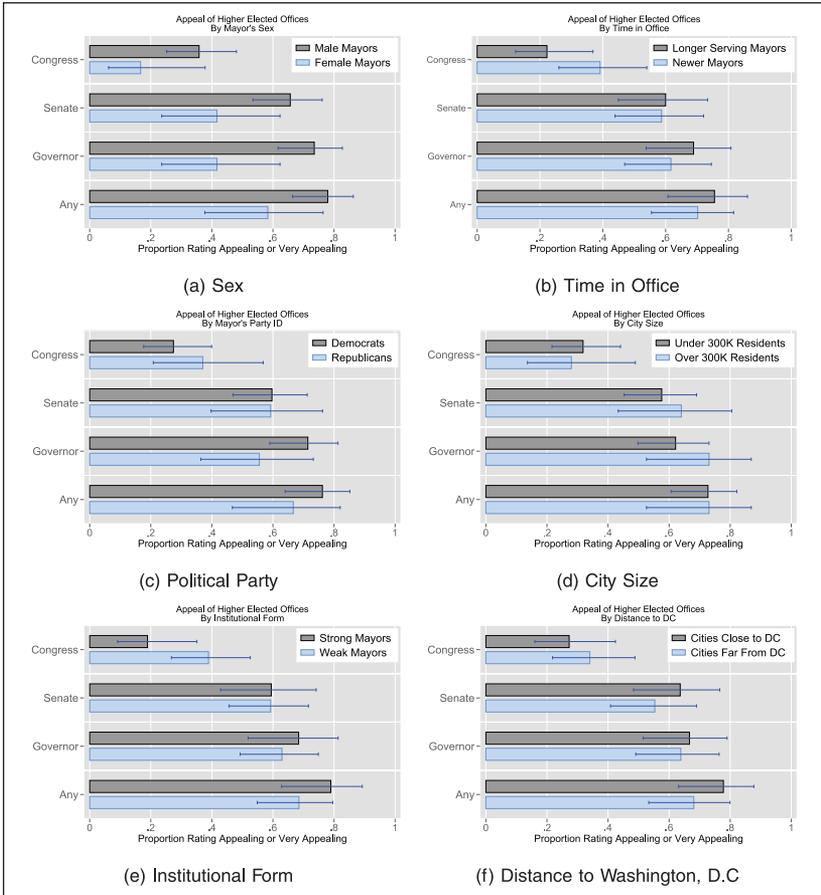
Relatedly—and again consistent with mayors' distaste for Congress—several mayors emphasized the unappealing nature of the fundraising, frequent elections, and partisan bickering endemic to the House of Representatives. The mid-sized city mayor quoted above said he had no interest in running for Congress because you "have to run every two years and [it's] so partisan." Another southern mayor similarly dismissed moving on to Congress: "I wouldn't want to run every two years."

Finally, we also found some qualitative support for the expectation that a geographic preference for staying close to home would mute mayors' political ambitions. One western mayor rated all other higher offices—including those in her own state—as relatively unappealing, noting, “I don't have a grand master plan of what I want to run for next . . . I have four kids at home. [Being mayor] is a great opportunity to build my community.” We do not, however, find more systematically that mayors from state capitals exhibit greater (state-level) progressive ambition. It may be, then, that, while for certain mayors these concerns are paramount, on a more systematic basis, geographic preferences do not drive mayoral progressive ambition.

The individual-level survey data also allow us to further unpack which kinds of mayors show an interest in running for higher office. We focus on assessments of the House, Senate, and governor offices as the three most plausible avenues for *electoral* progressive ambition. The other elected offices were almost universally panned and one cannot choose to run for the cabinet positions in the same way one runs for other elected positions. Figure 5 reports the proportion of mayors rating each electoral position “appealing” or “very appealing” by six variables of interest that speak to a range of potential sources of differences in preferences. These variables include personal traits (sex, time in office, and partisanship) and city ones (institutional form, city size, and distance to Washington, D.C.).

By far the most notable source of variation is the mayors' sex. Males are much more enthusiastic about each of the more prestigious elected offices, sometimes significantly so. While the small number of female mayors limits the confidence of the estimates, the pattern is clear and substantial across all higher offices. Female mayors were 20 to 30 percentage points less likely to view higher offices as appealing. These differences are even starker when limiting the analysis to those who rated each job “very appealing” (e.g., those most likely to pursue higher office) in Figure 6. Almost *none* of the female mayors saw the higher offices as being very appealing. Only 5% saw the Senate and governorship as very appealing, respectively, compared with about 30% and 50% of male mayors. (Interestingly, neither group rates Congress as very appealing, again consistent with our other results revealing a mayoral antipathy toward Congress.) This is especially striking given that our sample surveys individuals who *have already run for and won political office in a medium- to large-sized city*. In other words, our sample inherently selects for a disproportionately politically ambitious set of women. Even among these politically minded women, there is a significant ambition gap.<sup>15</sup>

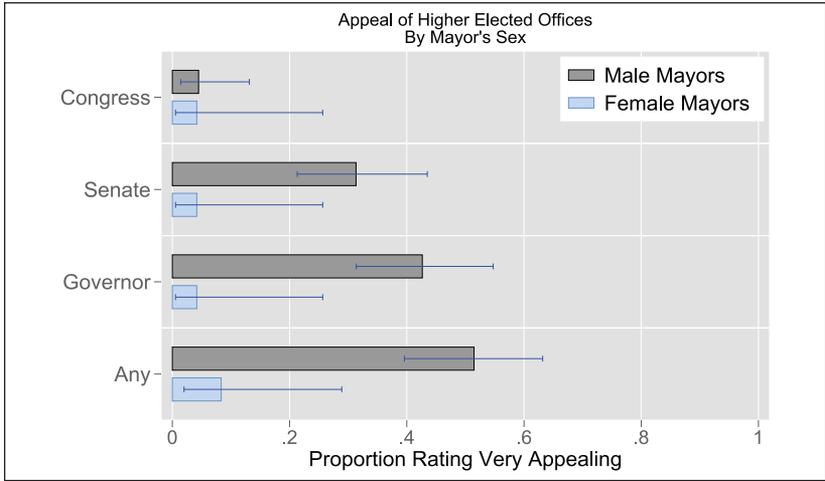
This lack of progressive ambition among female candidates does not appear to be a consequence of a disproportionate recruitment of male candidates. An identical proportion of male and female mayors—75%—reported



**Figure 5.** Proportion of mayors rating each electoral position as appealing by individual traits (sex, time in office, partisanship) and city attributes (institutional form, city size, and distance to Washington, D.C.).

being recruited for higher office. This evidence contrasts with scholarship that finds that party elites recruit men more than women (Crowder-Meyer, 2013; Fox & Lawless, 2010) and bolsters recent evidence that women are less receptive to recruitment efforts than men (Butler & Preece, 2016; Preece, 2016; Preece, Stoddard, & Fisher, 2016). The other two mayoral-level traits do not exhibit notable variation.

Contrary to some of the theoretical expectations, city-level traits have little relation to preferences over the other offices. Strong and weak mayors are



**Figure 6.** The proportion of male and female mayors rating the elected offices “very appealing.”

equally enthusiastic about the other higher offices. At least as notably, mayors of big (over 300,000 residents) and smaller cities gave similar responses. These similarities included their evaluations of Congress. One might expect that Congress would be more exciting and a bigger step up for mayors from smaller cities as it would represent an increase in constituency size. Finally, a city’s distance to Washington, D.C. (travel inconvenience) did not affect its mayor’s interest in national office.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion: Obstacles or Preferences

While we have uncovered interesting variations in *which* mayors run for higher office largely consistent with theoretical expectations, one central finding stands out as needing further discussion: Mayors of medium and large cities typically choose not to run for higher office. Indeed, in light of other research suggesting that local office should be an excellent jumping off point for progressively ambitious candidates, the fact that fewer than one fifth of mayors ever seek higher office is striking.

We have proposed a number of explanations for this result—including interest in urban issues, executive preference, geographic location, and distaste for fundraising, frequent elections, and partisan bickering—and found some support for all of them, particularly the ideological and electoral factors that render the House of Representatives especially unattractive. One final

factor may be the (perhaps) underappreciated attractiveness of big city mayors' offices. Mayors Rahm Emanuel of Chicago and Tom Barrett of Milwaukee are two examples of ambitious politicians who, after serving in the U.S. House of Representatives, opted to become mayors. It could be that being an executive of a large city, then, is simply more attractive than most other political offices, including federal legislative positions, that might be (mis)characterized as steps up. Future research into the career paths of other local officials—particularly longitudinal analyses of state legislators and city councillors—might help to shed further insight into how the mayoralty stacks up in the minds of ambitious politicians.

The seemingly widespread perceptions of governing inefficacy at the state and (especially) federal levels have led mayors to view cities as the only places where exciting legislation can get passed. As the mayor of a western city put it, cities “are where you actually get work done.” Until views of state and federal government become more positive, many politicians who would likely be high-quality political candidates will eschew higher office.

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### **Notes**

1. Bledsoe's (1993) study of city councillors, however, reveals that state legislative seats tended to be better routes for career advancement than the mayoralty.
2. For example, although McNitt's (2010) data include 848 mayors, he only studies 19 “major American cities” longitudinally.
3. In South Carolina, which also lacks a city greater than 150,000 people, we only include Columbia (population 131,686), which is both the state capital and the largest city in the state.
4. See Online Appendix Table A1 for a complete list of the cities in our sample.
5. We exclude interim mayors who are not later elected or appointed to a subsequent term. In some cases, we were unable to identify all of the mayors back to 1992. In these cases, we collected as many mayors as possible. Excluding these cities does not substantively change our results.
6. Collecting these data is challenging because, unlike most federal and state offices, there is no existing data set on mayors. We primarily relied on city websites and local newspapers to assemble the list of mayors and biographical

- characteristics. For candidate information, we used each state's Secretary of State website, municipal election databases, and local newspapers.
7. This practice is generally used to fill a mayoral vacancy, but a few cities use this system to select mayors instead of direct election.
  8. We also collected data on two additional dependent variables. The second dependent variable, *Nominee*, is coded as "1" if the mayor is on the ballot in the general election as the Democratic or Republican nominee or as an independent. The third dependent variable, *Winner*, is coded as "1" if the mayor won election to a higher office. We present results for these two additional dependent variables—which are separate from theories of candidate ambition—in our appendix.
  9. Higher offices here do not include mayors who opt for state legislative seats. A small number of mayors do run for those state legislative seats. We provide details about these mayors in the supplemental appendix in Tables A12 and A13.
  10. Some mayors run for multiple higher offices. Sixty-seven mayors run for one office, 18 for two, four for three, and one for four (Scotty Baesler, the mayor of Lexington, KY from 1982 to 1993, ran for governor in 1991 and lost; won election to the U.S. House in 1992 and was reelected in 1994 and 1996; ran for Senate in 1998 and lost, and ran again for the U.S. House in 2000 and lost).
  11. Online Appendix Table A9 reports results where the models include both the individual and contextual variables together. The results are consistent with the separate models. The coefficients on mayoral race and largest city in the state are similar across all models. In the pooled model, Democratic party is weakly significant, while the coefficient on strong mayor system decreases and is no longer significant (the coefficient is positive in all models). In the Former Mayors subsample, there is a weakly significant coefficient on % Hispanic in the city that is not significant in the pooled model.
  12. We estimate presidential vote at the city level using the two-party presidential vote of each city's county/counties. We use the last presidential election prior to the end of each mayor's time as mayor; for current mayors we use the 2012 presidential election. State and county presidential data were collected from Congressional Quarterly's "Voting and Elections Collection" data set (<http://library.cqpress.com/elections>).
  13. This response rate is similar to recent comparable elite surveys (Butler, Volden, Dynes, & Shor, 2015; Fisher & Herrick, 2013; Harden, 2013).
  14. This skew may be somewhat surprising; at first glance, it seems like it should be much easier to schedule interviews with the mayors of small cities rather than their counterparts governing larger communities. Our experience running this survey over multiple years, however, suggests that the mayors of larger cities have more professionalized scheduling offices, which actually made it easier to schedule our 15- to 30-min phone/in-person interviews.
  15. Regression models with full controls (Table A10) largely confirm these results. Though our gender coefficient is not statistically significant in all models, it is consistently negative and similar in magnitude.
  16. Table A11 displays similar results in full regression models with controls.

**ORCID iD**

Maxwell Palmer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7991-2499>

**Supplementary Material**

Supplementary material is available for this article online.

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### Author Biographies

**Katherine Levine Einstein** is an assistant professor of Political Science at Boston University and a co-principal investigator of the Menino Survey of Mayors. Her research interests include urban politics and policy, racial and ethnic politics, and American public policy.

**David M. Glick** is an assistant professor of Political Science at Boston University and a co-principal investigator of the Menino Survey of Mayors. His research interests include political institutions, especially law and courts, federalism, and local politics and policy.

**Maxwell Palmer** is an assistant professor of Political Science at Boston University and a co-principal investigator of the Menino Survey of Mayors. His research interests include Congress, the judiciary, redistricting and election law, and local political institutions.

**Robert J. Pressel** is a senior research support associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He received his dual BA/MA in Political Science from Boston University in 2016. His research interests include political parties and primaries, elite behavior, and state and local politics.