Why women don't aspire to run for office

Perceived gendered barriers and politicians as exemplars

Louise Halberg Nielsen

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PhD Dissertation

Politica

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Preface

My PhD dissertation, *Why women don't aspire to run for office: Perceived gendered barriers and politicians as exemplars*, consists of the three papers listed below and this summary report. The summary report presents the overall motivation and theoretical framework for my work, the key methodological approaches, and a summary of the main findings of the dissertation across the papers.

Paper A: How perceptions of gendered barriers factor into women's nascent political ambition (Working paper)

Paper B: Online harassment of politicians has a negative influence on citizens' perceptions of running for office (Working paper)

Paper C: Women politicians' role model effects: The influence of shared identities beyond gender (Invited to a second revise and resubmit to Political Behavior)

Chapter 1
Introduction

Women have had political rights to vote and run for elections equal to men for decades in most countries around the world, and for a century in many European countries (Schaeffer, 2020). Women also use these rights to turn out to vote. In many countries, women turn out to vote to the same extent or at higher rates than men (Schaeffer, 2020). Nonetheless, substantial gender gaps in political representation persist. Women are still much less likely than men to consider political candidacy, and elected politicians around the world are more often men than women (Fox & Lawless, 2024; UN-Women, 2025).

The unequal representation of men and women in elected assemblies has democratic consequences for at least two reasons. First, low representation of women in political bodies may compromise democratic principles of equal representation of citizens' substantial interests. It is argued that descriptive representation – that is, whether political representatives resemble citizens on demographic characteristics such as gender – can further substantive representation of a group's interests (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). Accordingly, studies have since found that women politicians strengthen the position of women's interests (Wangnerud, 2009). Second, descriptive representation also has consequences for feelings of inclusion, political trust, and legitimacy beliefs among citizens (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Pitkin, 1967). Women's equal presence has been shown to legitimize democratic decision-making processes and confer institutional trust (Clayton et al., 2019). This underlines that

understanding unequal representation of men and women is an important societal question.

Studies seeking to explain gender differences in political representation have distinguished between supply-side and demand-side explanations for women's under-representation. The demand side focuses on the demand for women politicians from voters, parties, and political gatekeepers. An important question within the demand-side literature is whether voters are biased against women candidates (Schwarz & Coppock, 2022; Teele et al., 2018). On the other hand, the supply side explores reasons for gender differences in candidate emergence, that is, the supply of political candidates. Women's lower levels of nascent political ambition (the very initial inclination to consider running for office) and women's lower levels of perceived self-qualifications to run for office relative to men's are prominent supply-side explanations (Lawless & Fox, 2010).

Recent studies indicate that to explain gender differences in political representation, we should look towards supply-side explanations rather than demand-side explanations. Studies of voter bias demonstrate that voters are not directly biased against voting for women; rather, voters exhibit a small bias pro women (Laustsen & Gothreau, 2024; Schwarz & Coppock, 2022). On the other hand, a substantial gender gap in nascent political ambition has been demonstrated, and the gender gap in nascent political ambition is a highly influential supply-side explanation (Ammassari et al., 2022, p. 1). Empirical research shows that a gender gap in political ambition emerges early in life, already among schoolchildren (Bos et al., 2022), and it is documented across countries (Ammassari et al., 2022; Costa & Wallace, 2021; Dahl & Nyrup, 2021), levels of office (Devroe et al., 2023; Lawless & Fox, 2010), generations, and demographic groups (Fox & Lawless, 2024) as well as among lay citizens (Crowder-Meyer, 2020), party members (Kjaer & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019), and elite samples (Lawless & Fox, 2010). Moreover, gender gaps in political ambition have been persistent across decades (Fox & Lawless, 2024). Accordingly, some scholars argue that the under-representation

of women can best be explained by women's lower levels of ambition to run compared to men's (Lawless & Fox, 2010). Women's low levels of political ambition is the puzzle at the heart of this dissertation: Why, after decades of political rights, are women less inclined to run for office?

Studies have examined a range of explanations for women's low levels of nascent political ambition. Prominent explanations often focus on gender roles and political socialization, including theories of gendered political socialization (Bos et al., 2022), women's low perceived self-qualifications to run for office following traditional gender socialization (Lawless & Fox, 2010), social role theory (Schneider & Bos, 2019), and the uneven care-taking burdens of men and women (Bernhard et al., 2021). These perspectives suggest that women are socialized to be less interested and confident in taking part in politics as a consequence of traditional gender socialization and political socialization in combination.

Recent studies indicate that we also need to examine the role of the political environment in which women consider running. A line of work has examined women's reactions to changes in the political environment following the 2016 American election, showing that women react to changes in the political environment and that this can alter women's intentions to run for office (DeMora et al., 2023; Dittmar, 2020) and engage in political protest (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2020). Studies of political role models also suggest that the presence of women politicians in politics can stimulate political ambition among more women (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025; Schneider & Holman, 2020). These studies underline an account of political ambition that is contextual, that is, influenced by the political environment in which women consider running.

Besides influencing women's nascent political ambition directly, the political environment can also do so indirectly through altering women's perceptions of running for office in a given political environment. Shames (2017) suggests that women's low political ambition is based on perceptions of high costs of running for office and low perceived benefits, given the conditions for being a political candidate and politician in the current political environment. Others argue that perceptions of

high costs of being a politician in the form of harassment may discourage women's political ambition (Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). Studies also find that altering women's perceptions of politics towards fulfilling communal goals rather than power-related goals can also increase women's projected enjoyment of a political career (Schneider & Sweet-Cushman, 2020; Schneider et al., 2016).

I suggest that there is more to unpack regarding women's perceptions of running for office, and particularly regarding perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office. In a study of young Americans, Shames (2017) finds that women perceive a gender bias towards running for office in the sense that women perceived men to have an advantage in various aspects of political campaigning. In an elite sample of Americans, Lawless and Fox (2010) likewise find the perception that it is more difficult for women to be elected to high-level office than men. While these two studies demonstrate overall perceptions of a gender bias among young and elite Americans, respectively, it remains empirically underexplored how such perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office shape women's nascent political ambition. Moreover, the content of such perceptions of gendered barriers have not been fully unfolded in prior studies.

In extension of this, another relevant question to ask is what shapes women's perceptions of running for office in a given political environment. Motivated by studies of women politicians' role model effects and studies of gendered political violence, I focus on how politicians as exemplars can shape women's perceptions of running for office and nascent political ambition. The role model perspective would suggest that women politicians as role models or exemplars have a positive influence on both women's perceptions of running for office and intentions to engage in politics (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025; Schneider & Holman, 2020). On the other hand, recent studies within the gendered political violence field suggest that potential aspirants perceive abuse of politicians as discouraging (Höhmann et al., 2025; Jong & Runderkamp, 2025) and that exposure to harassment of politicians may increase the perceived

costs of running for office and, subsequently, lower women's nascent political ambition (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). Building on these two perspectives, I ask how politicians as exemplars can illustrate various aspects of the political environment and shape women's perceptions of running for office as well as women's nascent political ambition.

Against this backdrop, my dissertation is guided by the following overarching research question:

How do women's perceptions of running for office shape nascent political ambition, and to what extent do politicians as exemplars shape perceptions and ambition?

I advance the theoretical claim that women's nascent political ambition is shaped by their perceptions of running for office in a given political environment and that perceived gendered barriers can discourage the development of political ambition. Building on exemplification theory, I argue that politicians serve as exemplars through which women interpret the political environment. They can either negatively influence perceptions of running for office and discourage ambition by exemplifying harassment of politicians or stimulate ambition by serving as role models who demonstrate women's political presence. In combination, this advances a theoretical perspective on political ambition as dependent on the political environment in which women consider running, where politicians as exemplars play a role in shaping perceptions of running for office and political ambition by illustrating both opportunities and obstacles within the political environment.

I examine the overarching theoretical argument in three separate papers, which each addresses a separate part of the research question and theoretical argument.

Paper A addresses the first part of the research question by examining perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office and how these may factor into the development of nascent political ambition among young women members of political youth parties. I examine this

through focus group interviews with young women members of political youth parties in Denmark. Importantly, the focus groups allow for exploration, and the young women can reflect on each other's experiences in the group discussion, stimulating in-depth discussion of perceived gendered barriers and how they factor into considerations of running for office. I find that the young women perceive gendered barriers in six arenas: the media, interactions with voters, political parties, voter support, political debate contexts, and across the political arena. Moreover, I find that the perceived gendered barriers most often are experienced as discouraging towards developing nascent political ambition among the young women. However, two counter-dynamics emerged; some refuse to let the barriers stop them, and others even feel motivated by the perceived inequality. These findings underline that political ambition can be shaped by perceptions of the political environment in which women consider running.

Paper B addresses the second part of the research question by examining the extent to which exposure to online harassment of politicians negatively influences perceptions of running for office. In the paper, I advance the theoretical argument that witnessing online harassment of politicians signals the costs of running for office given the political environment, and therefore negatively affects perceptions of running for office. I test the effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians with a survey experiment that manipulates exposure to harassment of politicians and whether or not the harassment is sexualized and gendered. I find that exposure to harassment of politicians can negatively influence citizens' perceptions of running for office and that women are significantly more negatively influenced than men. The negative effects are the same whether or not the harassment is gendered and sexualized. These findings underline that politicians as exemplars of the political environment can shape perceptions of running for office.

Paper C also addresses the second part of the research question by examining the extent to which women politicians as role models (or exemplars of women in politics) can stimulate increased political am-

bition among women and whether this effect is stronger when additional social identities are shared beyond gender. In the paper, I argue that women will be better able to identify with women politicians when they share more salient social identities and, second, that when women are better able to relate to women politicians based on additional shared identities, the role model effect on interest, efficacy, and ambition should be stronger. I test the argument with two survey experiments that strengthen causal identification and control over shared identities between the politician and the respondent. From a conjoint experiment, I find that women perceive politicians as more relatable and inspiring when they share more social identities. From a video-vignette experiment showing an animated story about a woman politician, I find that women politicians have the same role model effects on political interest, efficacy, and ambition regardless of shared racial and partisan identity. This suggests that a one-shot video treatment with a political exemplar similar to oneself is not enough to stimulate women's political ambition.

Taken together, the three papers highlight how perceptions of the political environment in which women consider running may factor into considerations about running for office and that politicians as exemplars of the political environment can shape these perceptions of running for office. This builds on and extends prior studies underlining how the political environment can influence women's political ambition. The findings in this dissertation suggest that women's low levels of political ambition seems to be a response to what engaging in politics entails (for a woman). Perceived gendered barriers and online harassment of politicians deter women from aspiring to run for office, and a role model video treatment cannot merely by resembling women spur political interest and ambition among women. Understanding the causes of women's low levels of political ambition is central if we want to think about increasing women's political ambition and narrowing the gender gap. The findings in this dissertation suggest that changes of the political environment can be influential in stimulating women's political ambition.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. In Chapter 2, I begin by conceptualizing nascent political ambition. I then lay out the theoretical framework of the dissertation, putting forward the argument that perceptions of running for office can shape nascent political ambition and that politicians as exemplars shape both these perceptions and political ambition. In Chapter 3, I outline the key methodological choices and discuss how both in-depth interview studies and experiments have been employed in this dissertation to bring forward our knowledge on women's desire to run for office. In Chapter 4, I summarize the core findings of the dissertation. First, I summarize the findings on perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office and their influence on the development of political ambition, and second, I summarize the findings on politicians as exemplars of both women in politics and as exemplars of harassment in the political environment. In Chapter 5, I conclude by reflecting on the limitations, contributions, and societal implications of the findings in the dissertation.

Chapter 2
Theory

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework of the dissertation. I begin by conceptualizing nascent political ambition and put forward an understanding of political ambition as influenced by perceptions of running for office in a given political environment. In the second part of the theoretical framework, I argue that politicians as exemplars can illustrate different aspects of the political environment and thereby influence women's perceptions of running for office and also their nascent political ambition.

2.1 Conceptualization of nascent political ambition

Nascent political ambition is understood as the inclination to consider running for political office one day. It is upstream to entering a specific political race, tracking the very initial desire to run for office and development of the idea of running for office one day (Fox & Lawless, 2005).[1] If a person would say yes when asked whether they could imagine running for a political office one day, then that person has some degree of nascent political ambition. However, there is no guarantee that the person will ever run for office. As a theoretical construct, nascent political ambition is telling of how individuals experience their role in the polit-

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[1] In contrast, the ambition to enter a specific race is termed *expressive* ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2005), and the ambition to advance to a higher office once elected is termed *progressive* ambition (Shames et al., 2020). When I refer to political ambition throughout this dissertation, I am focusing on *nascent* political ambition.

ical system (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025, p. 195). It is also related to political participation. Running for office can be seen as a (very demanding) form of political participation and nascent political ambition as an inclination to that form of political participation. Accordingly, the psychological dispositions coming before and driving political participation, such as political interest and internal efficacy (Burns et al., 2001), also drive nascent political ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2005).

Gender differences in nascent political ambition are rooted early in life. Already among schoolchildren, girls see politics as a man's world and express lower interest and ambition in politics than boys (Bos et al., 2022). Gender differences in political ambition have also proven persistent across time, generations, demographic groups, and countries (Ammassari et al., 2022; Costa & Wallace, 2021; Dahl & Nyrup, 2021; Fox & Lawless, 2024). Accordingly, much work has focused on socialization as an explanation of women's low levels of nascent political ambition (Bos et al., 2022; Lawless & Fox, 2010).

Adding to this, some work suggests that while rooted early in life, nascent political ambition is also malleable later in life. In studying women's nascent political ambition, I follow recent studies highlighting political ambition as dependent on context (DeMora et al., 2023; Och, 2020; Shames, 2017; Shames et al., 2020). In this view, political ambition is understood to be influenced by the political environment in which individuals consider running, and particularly by the perceived costs and benefits of running in a given political context. One can think of political ambition as influenced by a cost-benefit calculation weighing the perceived costs of running for office against the perceived benefits of running for office (Och, 2020; Shames, 2017). This means that political ambition can change following changes in the social and political environment, which again produces changes in perceived costs or benefits of running (Shames et al., 2020, p. 7). This perspective highlights that the political environment influences political ambition as an addition to other perspectives underlining, for instance, socialization and gender roles as

explanations of political ambition (see, e.g., Bos et al., 2022; Lawless and Fox, 2010).

2.2   Perceptions of running for office

In continuation of understanding political ambition as influenced by a cost-benefit calculation of perceived costs and benefits of running for office in a given political environment, it is relevant to delve into these underlying perceptions and their origins (Shames, 2017).[2]

Central to women's perceptions of running for office, studies suggest that women perceive a gender bias towards running for office. Shames (2017) finds that women perceive that men have an advantage in various aspects of political campaigning. In an elite sample of Americans, Lawless and Fox (2010) likewise find that women perceive that it is more difficult for women to be elected to high-level office than men. These studies point towards an interesting yet understudied avenue for studies of women's political ambition, namely, perceptions of gendered barriers towards women running for office. It is unclear whether women also perceive gendered barriers in other contexts outside the United States with higher levels of women's inclusion in politics, what types of gendered barriers are perceived, what the content of such perceptions are, and crucially, how these may play into the development of nascent political ambition.

2.2.1   Perceptions of gendered barriers

Studies have suggested that perceptions of gender discrimination in the electoral process might depress women's nascent political ambition, but this expectation is empirically underexplored.

Piscopo (2019, 2020) suggests that women's reluctance to run could stem from perceptions of politics as an uneven playing field favoring men.

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[2]With perceptions of running for office, I refer to both perceptions of running as a candidate and perceptions of being in office as an elected politician. These perceptions include both perceived costs and perceived benefits.

Based on a finding that women perceive men to have an advantage in political campaigning, Shames similarly proposes that anticipation of sex-based discrimination could be seen as an additional cost to running that affects women's political ambition negatively (Shames, 2017, p. 124). Equally, DeMora et al. (2023, p. 3) propose that perceptions of voter bias against women candidates may dampen the political ambition of women, and as an explanation for their finding that congresswomen over-perform relative to congressmen, Anzia and Berry (2011, p. 478) suggest that if women perceive sex discrimination in the electoral process, then only the most qualified women will emerge as candidates. Moreover, Jong and Runderkamp (2025) find that violence against women politicians specifically is experienced as discouraging to women considering entering politics.

The expectation that the anticipation of gendered barriers may discourage women's initial considerations about political candidacy often builds on prior studies examining gender biases in the political environment towards women running for office, for instance, within party organizations or from voters or media (Piscopo, 2020). Studies have examined various gendered barriers towards women politicians and candidates. I suggest that the various biases and barriers can be thought of in four key arenas of the political environment that politicians and candidates operate in as well as across the political environment. With the political environment, I refer to the different contexts that political candidates and elected politicians operate in or, in other words, the playing field for political candidates and elected politicians.[3]

First, a key arena for politicians and candidates is political parties. In party-centered electoral systems, political parties play a gate-keeping role (Paxton et al., 2021). To run for office, potential candidates must get on their party's list of candidates, and parties also control their placement of the ballot and the allocation of resources for election campaigns. As a result, securing party backing often determines a candidate's chances

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[3]Including candidates and politicians at all levels of office (e.g., local, regional, or national).

of success. Moreover, political parties are also defining for elected politicians' political work. Research indicates that political parties may pose a gendered barrier for women running for office and highlights gender disparities in recruitment practices, showing that party leaders are more likely to recruit men than women (Fox & Lawless, 2010; Sanbonmatsu, 2010). Furthermore, while parties may include women on their candidate lists to signal diversity, they often assign them to unwinnable positions under proportional representation systems (Piscopo, 2020).[4]

Second, another central arena for political candidates and politicians is the news media, where politicians and candidates promote their political agendas to reach potential voters. Scholars have explored gender differences in the media coverage of political candidates, showing that coverage of women often emphasizes appearance, personality, and family roles rather than political issues (Conroy et al., 2015; Dunaway et al., 2013; Heldman et al., 2005). Even when the focus is on politics, research finds notable distinctions. For example, Fowler and Lawless (2009) demonstrate that press coverage of women candidates highlights their positions on issues, while coverage of men more frequently underscores their political actions. In addition, women candidates may receive less overall media attention than men (Lühiste and Banducci, 2016, but see Hayes and Lawless, 2016). Together, these patterns suggest that media coverage can function as a barrier to women's electoral success.

Third, direct outreach to voters both online on social media and offline, for instance, when handing out campaign flyers, are an important part of the work of political candidates and politicians and the political environment they operate in. Studies have examined how harassment of politicians on social media can be gendered (Erikson et al., 2023; IPU, 2016; Meriläinen, 2024) or sexist (Gorrell et al., 2020), how women politicians are subject to more gendered and sexualized violence and harassment online (Erikson et al., 2023), and how women political volun-

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[4]Relatedly, research also points towards funding and donations as a potential gendered barrier in, e.g., the United States (Och, 2020; Shames, 2017). I do not include this as a separate arena given the Danish context, where candidate funding is organized within political parties.

teers receive more hostile and silencing responses from voters than men volunteers (Yan & Bernhard, 2024). This suggests that interacting with voters may also be a gendered barrier hindering women politicians.

Fourth, gaining voters' support is an essential part of being a political candidate and of the electoral success of political candidates. Securing voter support can also present a gendered barrier if voters hold different expectations to candidates based on gender or if voters outright discriminate based on gender in their vote choice. Research on vote discrimination finds a small but statistically significant bias in favor of women candidates, all else equal (Laustsen & Gothreau, 2024; Schwarz & Coppock, 2022). At the same time, other studies suggest that voters hold candidates to different qualification standards based on gender (Bauer, 2020; Fulton, 2012) or tend to favor traits that are more demanding for women to meet (Teele et al., 2018).

Finally, studies have pointed towards barriers towards women politicians that cut across the political environment that politicians and candidates operate in. Politics being masculine and role incongruity between politics and women's gender role may pose a gendered barrier towards women (Schneider & Bos, 2019), and violence against women politicians may limit or hinder women's political inclusion (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023; Håkansson, 2021; Krook, 2020; Krook & Sanín, 2016). Moreover, Bardall et al. (2020) argue that even if political violence is not gendered in motive or form, the impact of political violence may still be gendered and pose a barrier to women in politics.

These reviewed studies all point to barriers in the political environment towards women running for office. In addition to studying documented 'objective' barriers in the political environment towards women running for office, *perceptions* of gendered barriers are important to study since such perceptions may influence the development of political ambition early on and independently of any 'objective' barriers that women candidates may encounter. For example, while gendered media coverage can influence the electoral outcomes of women candidates, its potential to discourage potential future candidates from developing political

ambition likely arises only if they perceive such coverage as a barrier for women. I argue that women may anticipate any of the barriers reviewed above and perceive them to be a gendered barrier when developing perceptions of the costs and benefits of running for office and forming their political ambition. To this end, I understand perceptions of gendered barriers as perceptions of gender differences in opportunities for and/or cost/benefits of being a political candidate or an elected politician (Nielsen, 2025a). However, it is unclear which gendered barriers women perceive, what the content of their perceptions are, and how the perceptions of barriers play into their considerations about running for office and the development of political ambition. In this dissertation, I therefore seek to advance the theoretical conversation on perceptions of gender biases in the electoral process by examining women's perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office and how an expectation of meeting such gendered barriers may influence women's development of the desire to run for office.

2.3 Politicians as exemplars of the political environment

The second part of the theoretical framework of my dissertation focuses on politicians as exemplars of the political environment and how they shape both women's perceptions of running for office and women's nascent political ambition.

In extension of the perspective of understanding women's nascent political ambition as dependent on the political context, examining what shapes women's perceptions of running for office is a relevant next step. I seek to advance our understanding of the origins of women's political ambition and perceptions of running for office by outlining how politicians as exemplars can play a role in shaping these.

Intuitively, it follows from the perspective that the political environment in itself shapes women's perceptions of running for office. However,

interpreting the political environment and thoroughly evaluating all the costs and benefits of running for office is a complex task. I argue that politicians as exemplars are a lens through which women interpret the political environment and therefore a relevant factor in shaping women's perceptions of running for office as well as women's nascent political ambition.[5]

Exemplification theory suggests that individuals form perceptions and judgments based on exemplars (Zillmann & Brosius, 2012). Exemplars are instances capable of representing other instances of a larger group. An exemplar shares a defining feature and can therefore exemplify a larger group that also shares the defining feature. For instance, the first moon landing serves as an example (an exemplar) of landings of spacecrafts (Zillmann & Brosius, 2012). Relevant to this dissertation, any politician serves as an exemplar of politicians. Moreover, exemplification theory argues that since our immediate experience with societal issues is limited, our perceptions and evaluations of societal phenomena are based on event accounts of others who have observed or experienced the events – and these event reports are communicated exemplars. Exemplars have the capacity to make abstractions comprehensible (Zillmann & Brosius, 2012).

I argue that politicians (including both political candidates and elected politicians) serve as exemplars and illustrate to lay citizens what it is like to be a candidate and politician in a given political environment. This shapes perceptions of what it entails to run for office and be a politician in the political environment and, subsequently, affects nascent political ambition. Since lay citizens have limited direct experience with the political environment that politicians operate in, politicians as exemplars can play a substantial role in shaping these perceptions.

Exemplification theory is rooted in psychological theories of information processing, including heuristics, and social learning theory. Building

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[5]Importantly, I do *not* argue that politicians as exemplars are the only lens through which women form perceptions of the political environment. Women could also form perceptions of the political environment from news media, first-hand experiences with being politically active, talking to politically active friends and relatives, etc.

on the representativeness heuristic, exemplification theory argues that exemplars become heuristics for understanding a larger phenomenon, and this process allows us to develop generalizations about a larger group of phenomena from an exemplar that is categorized as part of the larger group – whether or not the exemplar is an accurate representative of the larger group. Exemplars are thought to be more prominent than statistical information because of the availability heuristic (exemplars are more easily available to recall in the mind than abstract statistical information) (Bigsby et al., 2019; Gibson & Zillman, 1994; Zillmann & Brosius, 2012). Second, exemplification theory is rooted in social learning theory with an argument of observational learning. This implies that individuals learn about consequences from actions by observing others carrying out these actions (e.g., by observing exemplars), which subsequently shapes individuals' own actions. Moreover, exemplars that engage emotions are thought to have a stronger effect on dispositions and associated behaviors based on social learning theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2012), and exemplars that are more similar to oneself are also thought to have stronger effects (Ostfeld & Mutz, 2014).

Building on exemplification theory, I argue that politicians and candidates can serve as exemplars of what it entails to be a politician and candidate in a given political environment and illustrate different aspects of the political environment in which they operate. Aligned with the conceptualization of the political environment as the contexts that candidates and politicians operate in, including political parties, media, interactions with voters, vote support, and across the political arena (see section 2.2.1), I suggest that politicians as exemplars can illustrate any of these aspects of the political environment and that this can affect women's inclination to run for office both directly and indirectly through changing perceptions of running for office. This is theoretically aligned with theories of women politicians' role model effects that see women politicians as exemplars, signaling that women are capable political leaders and increasing political interest and political ambition among women (see, e.g., Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2025). However, the theoretical ar-

gument of politicians as exemplars is also broader than the role model argument. Studies of violence against politicians have suggested that citizens witnessing politicians being harassed may be discouraged from engaging in politics themselves (Höhmann et al., 2025; Jong & Runderkamp, 2025; Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). We can think of this as politicians being exemplars of the harassment that politicians are subject to and illustrating the costs of running for office. I use the broader theoretical framework of politicians as exemplars to capture both aspects of how politicians can illustrate different aspects of the political environment in which women consider running, which in turn affects women's perceptions of running for office and political ambition.

2.3.1 Politicians as exemplars of harassment in the political environment

We know from studies that politicians are subject to substantial amounts of harassment and violence (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023). Moreover, an emerging empirical pattern indicates that women politicians are subject to psychological violence and harassment more often than men politicians and that men politicians, on the other hand, are subject to physical violence and harassment more often than women politicians (Bjarnegård, 2023; Collignon & Rüdig, 2021; Håkansson, 2021; Herrick et al., 2021; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2024), although see also (Bjarnegård et al., 2022; Herrick et al., 2021). Furthermore, women politicians are subject to sexualized and gendered violence and harassment more often than men politicians, both online and offline (Bjarnegård, 2023; Collignon & Rüdig, 2021; Erikson et al., 2023; Gorrell et al., 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2024; Ørtoft et al., 2025; Pedersen et al., 2021). Clearly, political violence and harassment are a non-trivial part of the political environment that political candidates and elected politicians operate in.

Much harassment of politicians occurs online on social media (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2023). Social me-

dia is not only a prime arena for harassment of politicians; it is also an arena where citizens can witness this harassment (Andresen et al., 2022; Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025). Contrary to threats received in politicians' mailboxes, harassment of politicians in comment sections on social media is visible to anyone, and additionally, citizens are also exposed to it when news media cover harassment of politicians. In news stories covering the topic, politicians are often used as examples (see, e.g., Frederiksen, 2024; Holm, 2024; Lund, 2025).

I argue that politicians (unwillingly) become exemplars of the negative aspects of being a politician in the political environment when they are harassed publicly online and when news media cover the topic and bring examples of politicians being harassed. Based on exemplification theory, we would expect that citizens' perceptions of running for office are affected by witnessing harassment of politicians since these politicians become exemplars of being a politician in the political environment. Exposure to the harassment of politicians online may create or strengthen a perception that online harassment is a likely consequence of running for office. This unpleasant aspect of being a political candidate and politician may subsequently negatively influence citizens' perceptions of running for office, making political candidacy and political office less appealing to those who observe the harassment of politicians.

Prior studies have examined whether exposure to harassment of politicians online negatively influences citizens' nascent political ambition (Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024) and intention to participate in politics more broadly (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025). Contrary to expectations, these studies have largely not found deterring effects. This is particularly puzzling since other studies show that online harassment is perceived as an obstacle. Specifically, a substantial share of Swiss youth party members perceive online abuse as an obstacle to enter politics (Höhmann et al., 2025), and women political aspirants in the Netherlands see violence against women politicians, including online harassment, as a barrier towards running for office (Jong & Runderkamp, 2025). To advance our knowledge on how citizens are affected by wit-

nessing harassment of politicians, in paper B of this dissertation, I narrow in on citizens' underlying perceptions of running for office, as these go before any political ambition or participation theoretically, and examine how exposure to online harassment of politicians affects citizens' perceptions of running for office.

2.3.2 Politicians as exemplars of women in the political environment

Standing across from the perspective of politicians as exemplars of harassment against politicians is the role model perspective. In the role model perspective, women politicians are seen as exemplars of women in politics and the success that women may achieve within politics, which is thought to stimulate political engagement among women. Women politicians are expected to serve as role models since politics is a masculine environment traditionally occupied by men, and therefore, women politicians can change masculine stereotypes about the political environment and stimulate political engagement among women simply by their presence in politics (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025).

The central claim in studies of the role model effects of women politicians is that women politicians as role models stimulate greater political engagement among women. Accordingly, I understand women politicians' role model effects as the effects of the presence of women in politics on other women's political engagement (Nielsen, 2025b). This claim has been studied under various concepts such as descriptive representation (e.g., Reingold and Harrell, 2010), symbolic representation (e.g., Lawless, 2004), contextual cues (e.g., Atkeson, 2003), and political role models (e.g., Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2017). The empirical findings of role model effects are somewhat mixed but point towards positive role model effects of women's presence in politics.[6] The mixed results of prior research indicate a need for further theorizing and suggest that factors beyond gender may influence the role model effects of women politi-

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[6]See elaborated review of empirical studies and their findings in paper C.

cians. A key theoretical limitation in existing studies is their tendency to treat gender in isolation, without considering the impact of other shared identities with women politicians. A limited number of studies have explored the role of partisanship and ideology, and these findings suggest that role model effects are more pronounced among women who share the same partisan identity (Costa & Wallace, 2021; Mariani et al., 2015; Reingold & Harrell, 2010). Drawing on social psychological role model theory and social identity theory, I propose a framework for examining how additional shared identities shape the role model effects of women politicians. Moreover, I extend the theoretical discussion of women's political role models by introducing a two-step process to conceptualize role model effects.

Social psychological role model theory states that role models stimulate change a) by providing an example of the success that one may achieve, which changes self-stereotyping and perceptions of external barriers within a domain; b) by providing a template of behaviors needed to achieve similar success, which increases an observer's self-efficacy through vicarious learning; and c) by being an inspiration and making a domain seem more desirable and interesting (see, e.g., Lockwood, 2006; Morgenroth et al., 2015). The strength of a role model's influence depends on how strongly an individual is able to identify with a role model. When individuals are better able to identify with a role model, they will be more likely to aspire to similar achievements (Asgari et al., 2012; Hoyt et al., 2012; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Lockwood et al., 2002; Stout et al., 2011).

Applied to women politicians as role models or exemplars, this means that women politicians stimulate political engagement among women by a) changing perceptions of politics as a masculine environment and increasing women's identification with politics, b) increasing women's internal political efficacy through vicarious learning, and c) increasing women's political interest and ambition through inspiration. Applied directly to the theoretical framework of this dissertation, this means that women politicians as exemplars of women in politics change the

perceived costs and benefits of running for office and perceived gendered barriers (by changing perceptions of barriers within politics and self-stereotyping), but also that women politicians as inspirations and through vicarious learning affect political interest, efficacy, and ambition directly.

Building on role model theory, which demonstrates that the effectiveness of role models on individual aspirations depends on identification with the model (Asgari et al., 2012; Hoyt et al., 2012; Stout et al., 2011), I conceptualize the psychological mechanism underlying role model effects as a two-step process. First, women must identify with a woman politician; second, this identification can generate downstream effects on their own political engagement. Thus, understanding which politicians women are able to identify with is an important first step.

First, social identity theory suggests that individuals are better able to identify with those who share their salient social identities (Morgenroth et al., 2015). This implies that women are better able to identify with women politicians than men, but also that additional shared identities with a woman politician will increase identification further. Race, age, social class, and partisan identity are also salient social identities in the political context (Huddy et al., 2015; Titelman, 2023), and we would expect that sharing these identities in addition to gender would make a woman politician even more relatable than if gender was the only shared identity. Second, the role model effect on women's political interest, efficacy, and ambition is expected to be stronger following the increased identification based on additional shared identities. The logic is that seeing someone more like themselves will make women believe that they can achieve something similar and stimulate greater interest, more than would a woman politician who is different from themselves in other respects.

2.4 Summarizing the theoretical argument

In this chapter, I have laid forward the overarching theoretical framework of my dissertation. I have argued that politicians serve as exemplars that illustrate different aspects of the political environment. This shapes women's perceptions of running for office and being a politician, including their perceptions of gendered barriers and the costs and benefits of running for office, as well as their nascent political ambition. I see politicians as exemplars as a lens through which women interpret the political environment and form perceptions of running for office. I have also argued that perceptions of running for office, and particularly perceptions of gendered barriers, can shape women's development of nascent political ambition. Figure 2.1 serves as an illustration of the theoretical framework and of how each paper in the dissertation connects to the theoretical framework.

Figure 2.1: Illustration of the theoretical framework
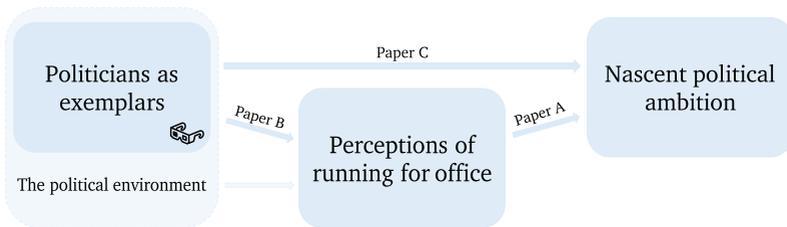
Chapter 3
Methods

In this chapter, I present the research designs that I employed to examine women's nascent political ambition, perceptions of running for office, and how politicians as exemplars can shape these, including the most central methodological choices of the dissertation. The chapter begins with an overall description of the research designs employed and then proceeds to describe core elements of the methods employed in each of the three papers in the dissertation, highlighting and discussing key choices in light of the relevant research criteria.

3.1 Overview of studies and research designs

Throughout this dissertation, I employ diverse methodological approaches to further our knowledge of women's perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office and how this factors into considerations about running for office, as well as the extent to which politicians as exemplars have an influence on perceptions of running for office and nascent political ambition. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the research designs used in each of the three papers in the dissertation and the key research criterion that has guided the design choices in each paper.

Table 3.1: Overview of research designs of the papers

	Design	Key criterion	Sample	Description
Paper A	Focus group interviews	Exploration and in-depth understanding	8 focus groups with 28 young women members of political youth parties	Focus group interviews with women members of Danish political youth parties exploratorily examines perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office and how these factor into the development of political ambition.
Paper B	Text vignette experiment	Internal validity and experimental control	3,224 Danish citizens, nationally representative on gender, age, education, and region	A vignette experiment manipulates exposure to online harassment of politicians to examine the effect on perceptions of running for office and being a politician measured with both closed and open-ended questions.
Paper C	Study 1: Conjoint experiment Study 2: Video vignette experiment	Internal validity and experimental control	2,400 American women, incl. 1,200 White women and 1,200 Black women	Two experiments manipulate shared identities between the respondent and a politician to examine the effect on perceiving the politician as relatable and inspiring and on the woman politician's role model effect on women's political interest, internal efficacy, and ambition.

The first part of the research question of this dissertation revolves around how perceptions of running for office, with a focus on perceptions of gendered barriers, shape nascent political ambition. Addressing this question requires rich, in-depth data that can both uncover women's perceptions of gendered barriers and how these play into considerations about running for office. Therefore, paper A takes an in-depth approach and utilizes focus group interviews with young women party members to explore perceptions of gendered barriers and young women's reasoning around these when developing (or not developing) political ambition. The second part of the research question of this dissertation revolves around the extent to which politicians as exemplars shape perceptions of running for office and nascent political ambition. To address this, causal identification of the effect of politicians as exemplars is important. Papers B and C rely on survey experiments to identify causal effects of women politicians as role models and politicians as exemplars of harassment on women's political ambition and perceptions of running for office. Focus group interviews and survey experiments build on distinct research traditions. However, they both contribute to building a more comprehensive understanding of drivers of women's political ambition. In the following sections, I elaborate on how each of the designs in the papers helps answer the guiding research question of the dissertation and discuss key design choices for the research design of each paper.

3.2 Studying perceptions of gendered barriers using focus groups interviews

Given the limited prior knowledge of perceptions of gendered barriers and how these may play into the development of political ambition among women, I have taken an exploratory interpretive approach to addressing this first part of the research question. This approach is favorable since it allows for developing rich understandings of how women make sense of the political environment and provides insights

into women's perceptions of barriers towards running for office that are unique to women. Second, and equally important, it also allows for uncovering the meaning ascribed to any perceived gendered barriers in considerations about running for office (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

Variance-based approaches, such as surveys, have demonstrated that women perceive men to have an advantage in various aspects of running for office (Lawless & Fox, 2010; Shames, 2017). However, a drawback is that the variance-based approaches cannot account for the meaning ascribed to perceived gendered barriers in the development of nascent political ambition or, in other words, *how* perceptions of gendered barriers factor into considerations about running for office. To address this, in paper A, I study women's perceptions of gendered barriers and how they play into development of nascent political ambition using focus group interviews with young women members of political youth parties.

In examining perceived gendered barriers and nascent political ambition, young women party members are a highly relevant group to study. Party members are central to candidate recruitment; yet, women withdraw in particular (and to a larger extent than men) in the transition from membership to potential candidate in Denmark (Kjaer & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). Since party members constitute a central pool of future potential candidates, their perceptions of gendered barriers are especially interesting and consequential, even though their perceptions of gendered barriers may differ from those of the general population. Furthermore, focusing on young women provides insight into how gendered barriers shape political ambition during formative years of socialization, when ideas about running for office first emerge and are formed (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Jong & Runderkamp, 2025).

Focus groups are particularly well suited for several reasons. In Danish political discourse, gender equality is often seen as achieved (Fiig & Siim, 2020), which can make it difficult for young women to articulate gendered political experiences. The group format allowed participants to open up by engaging with each other's perspectives, producing rich data

through collective reflection and debate (Halkier, 2016). Participants having to give reasons for their perceptions to each other also provided rich insights with little interviewer involvement. This approach captured how perceptions of gendered barriers and political ambition can emerge through shared experiences and conversations with peers. Moreover, focus groups revealed which views were widely held or contested and mirrored discussions that participants had previously engaged in within their party contexts, thus offering insight into their lived political realities and collective meaning making.

Moreover, the focus group design supports an open and exploratory approach to the research question by enabling an open exploration of perceived gendered barriers and their consequences without imposing predefined theoretical categories. The moderation of the focus groups was specifically structured to accommodate this and only probed the theoretically suggested gendered barriers after an open discussion. The focus group discussions started out broadly with motivations to engage in politics and reasons for and against running for office as topics of discussion. The topic of gender differences in running for office was only introduced later on to see whether participants brought it up themselves in their considerations about running for office. Second, the specific gendered barriers suggested by prior literature were also only probed after participants' initial discussions of gender differences in running for office to exploratively see what kind of gendered barriers they brought up themselves unprompted. The group discussions were moderately structured and included exercises to facilitate these discussions (Colucci, 2007; Morgan, 1997). In this way, the focus groups provide a deep understanding of young women's perceptions of the political environment and any gendered barriers to being a political candidate and politician, as well as an understanding of how such perceptions are brought into considerations about running for office among young women party members.

I conducted eight focus group interviews with young women members of political youth parties in Denmark from April 4th to May 2nd,

2024. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Aarhus University.[7] In the recruitment, I aimed for including participants from all political youth parties across groups and creating variation within each group by including both left- and right-wing participants as well as participants from both older, established parties and younger parties to bring together different perspectives and facilitate discussion. At the same time, the participants all shared the experience of being engaged in youth politics, ensuring common ground for a comfortable group dynamic (Halkier, 2016). Similar to the structuring of the group discussions, the analytical strategy also combined the theoretical structure with inductively emerged arenas and consequences of gendered barriers in two rounds of flexible coding, including, first, index coding and cross-case memos and, second, analytical codes (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

3.3 Studying explanations of nascent political ambition using survey experiments

The second part of the guiding research question for the dissertation revolves around the extent to which politicians as exemplars shape women's perceptions of running for office and their nascent political ambition. This is essentially a causal claim.

Experiments are the golden standard for identification of causal effects since they eliminate selection bias (Angrist & Pischke, 2014). Randomization of participants into treatment conditions ensures equal potential outcomes between groups, and therefore, a difference in outcomes between groups can be ascribed to the experimental treatment (in this case, a politician exemplar). On the other hand, experiments also come with drawbacks. When designing experiments with high experimental control, it can be a challenge to ensure that the treatments mimic real-world phenomena and, thus, ensure high external validity. In

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[7]Approval number BSS-2023-101.

the following sections, I elaborate on how this potential tradeoff has been balanced in paper B and paper C, respectively.

Moreover, affecting nascent political ambition in a survey experiment is a tall order. Prior studies have successfully affected women's nascent political ambition in survey experiments (see, e.g., Clayton et al., 2023, 2024; Costa and Wallace, 2021; Holman and Schneider, 2018), but studies also indicate that political ambition is rooted early in life (Bos et al., 2022) and that few lay citizens have any nascent political ambition (despite nascent political ambition capturing the very early inclinations to consider running for office).[8] Therefore, I also focus on other theoretically relevant orientations towards politics that are underlying nascent political ambition as the outcome measures in the experimental studies of this dissertation. In the survey experiment examining any negative effects of exposure to online harassment, I focus on perceptions of running for office. Examining the effect on underlying perceptions of running for office is an addition to existing studies that have examined discouraging effects of exposure to online harassment on political participation and ambition and found no overall effects (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). In the role model experiment, I also study political interest and internal political efficacy as outcome measures since these are the theoretically relevant political dispositions coming before nascent political ambition in the theoretical argument of women politicians' role model effects. Moreover, I also use a behavioral measure of clicking on a link to learn more about running for office from the literature on women's nascent political ambition (Clayton et al., 2023).

The experiments carried out as part of this dissertation have all been pre-registered on OSF[9] and have received approval by the Institutional Review Board at Aarhus University.[10]

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[8]For instance, in a sample of Danish citizens, nearly 60 percent have zero nascent political ambition (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025).

[9]The pre-registrations can be found on the following links:
https://osf.io/kq5xb/overview?view_only=ca68b69d31f84d5e8ce63b97a57eae5a
https://osf.io/x7syz/overview
https://osf.io/q74m3/overview

[10]Approval numbers BSS-2023-052 and BSS-2025-024-S1.

3.3.1 Politicians as exemplars of online harassment

In paper B, I examine the extent to which politicians as exemplars of harassment in the political environment shape perceptions of running for office among both men and women with a survey experiment. In the experiment, exposure to harassment of politicians is varied, meaning that a control group is not exposed to any harassment of politicians, whereas the treatment groups are. Moreover, between treatment groups, two dimensions are varied: the gender of the politician being harassed and whether the harassment is sexualized and gendered or not. The experimental design allows for causal identification of the effect of exposure to online harassment of politicians on perceptions of running for office, and it is also aligned with the research design of prior studies (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024).

Prior studies have examined whether the effect of exposure to online harassment of politicians is stronger among women than men (Pedersen, 2002; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024) and whether the effect of exposure to sexualized online harassment of a woman politician is stronger among women than men (Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). A contribution of paper B is the variation of whether the treatment is sexualized and gendered across both men and women politicians as exemplars. This extends prior studies and enables testing a) whether sexualized and gendered harassment influences both men and women citizens more negatively than nonsexualized and non-gendered harassment across the gender of the politician being harassed, and b) whether women citizens are more negatively affected than men by witnessing online harassment of politicians across both the gender of the politician being harassed and type of harassment. It is not only theoretically relevant to disentangle sexualized or gendered aspects of the online harassment and the gender of the targeted politician. It is also empirically relevant since both men and women politicians are subjected to sexualized and gendered harassment online, although women politicians experience it more often (Erikson et al., 2023).

Another contribution of paper B lies in the outcome measures. Prior studies have examined negative effects of exposure to online harassment on citizens' political participation and nascent political ambition. Overall, these studies have not found the theoretically expected deterring effects (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). A limitation of the research designs of existing studies is that nascent political ambition is very low among lay citizens, meaning that experiments examining any negative effects on nascent political ambition may encounter a floor-effect problem where it is hardly possible to lower political ambition any further (Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). Therefore, focusing on the underlying perceptions of running for office coming before nascent political ambition extends prior studies. I focus on three aspects of perceptions of running for office as outcomes in the study: 1) perceiving online harassment as a reason against running, 2) overall perceptions of running as a candidate, and 3) perceptions of being in office. Moreover, I measure these with both closed-scale and open-ended questions in which respondents were asked to advise a friend who is considering running for office and to list reasons against running. From these open-ended questions, I code whether online harassment or harassment and social media more broadly are mentioned. These open-ended questions capture whether respondents bring online harassment into their considerations about running for office.

Finally, external validity is an important research criterion for survey experiments (Mutz, 2011). The treatments were designed based on real examples of online harassment of politicians to match the tone and intensity of online harassment towards politicians and strengthen the external validity of the treatment. I here understand external validity of the treatment as regarding both experimental realism, that the theoretical variable of interest is manipulated by the treatment, and mundane realism, that the treatment resembles how the treatment occurs in the real world (Mutz, 2011). To cleanly vary sexualized and gendered elements of the treatment without subsequently varying other aspects of the treatment, single words of the harassing messages in the treatment were varied.

When designing the variations in the harassing messages, particular attention was paid to matching the realism and intensity of the messages as well as ensuring realistic variation in gendered and sexualized harassment across both men and women politicians. Pre-testing ensured that the example messages were perceived as equally realistic across variations in sexualized and gendered elements to men and women politicians. Second, pre-testing also ensured that the example messages in the sexualized and gendered treatment condition were clearly perceived as sexualized and gendered and, vice versa, that the example messages in the non-sexualized and non-gendered treatment condition were not perceived as neither sexualized nor gendered. Importantly, the experiment also included factual manipulation checks to confirm attentiveness to treatment and that the variations in the treatment were clearly perceived (Kane & Barabas, 2019). Also related to the external validity, the study also includes several outcome measures to ensure that the findings do not depend on one specific outcome measurement. Last, the experiment was fielded in a nationally representative sample of Danish citizens.

3.3.2   Women politicians as role models

In paper C, I examine the extent to which women politicians' role model effects on women's political interest, efficacy, and ambition depend on additional shared social identities beyond gender.

Much work on women politicians' role model effects has been based on observational cross-sectional data – comparing the average political engagement of women in places with a woman politician to the average political engagement of women in places without women politicians (see, e.g., Karp and Banducci, 2008; Liu and Banaszak, 2017; Reingold and Harrell, 2010). Addressing the shortcomings of cross-sectional data in terms of causal identification, a line of work examines role model effects using panel or time-series data, that models change in political engagement of women after the introduction of women politicians, which minimizes selection bias compared to cross-sectional analyses (see, e.g.,

Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2025; Costa and Schaffner, 2018; Ladam et al., 2018; Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2017). In recent years, survey experiments have also been used to study the role model effects of women politicians, allowing researchers to manipulate specific characteristics of a role model – such as party identification – with high internal validity and experimental control (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025; Costa & Wallace, 2021; Schneider & Holman, 2020; Wolak, 2015).

In line with the state of the art in the literature, I examine women politicians' role model effects depending on additional shared identities with two survey experiments. A conjoint experiment varies a politicians' characteristics. This increases the causal identification of the influence of shared identities with a politician on perceiving the politician as relatable and inspiring as well as the interaction between different shared social identities. The conjoint experiment enables teasing apart the influence of different shared social identities and their interactions with sufficient statistical power. However, the closed information environment of the conjoint experiment is somewhat artificial and does not directly resemble how citizens gain information about politicians in real life. To maintain as much realism as possible in the experiment, I manipulate a concise set of social identities that mirror information that citizens often have about politicians in the real world.

Second, a video vignette experiment with videos of a woman politician's story examines the role model effect of a woman politician on women's political interest, efficacy, and ambition depending on additional shared racial and partisan identity with the woman politician. The videos tell a story about a woman politician and how she became politically engaged. Video treatments rather than text-based vignettes were chosen to increase respondent engagement and deliver a strong treatment – an important consideration given that previous studies generally find small or inconsistent effects (Bonneau & Kanthak, 2020; Costa & Wallace, 2021; Kromer & Parry, 2019; Wolak, 2015). Animated videos were chosen over videos with real women politicians out of ethical and practical considerations. Importantly, animated characters allowed for

varying the racial identity of the politician without subsequently varying other characteristics of the politician.

On the other hand, the experimental control and clean variation of shared identities with the animated videos come at the expense of mundane realism in particular. Since this study is among the first to use animated characters to examine role model effects, it is somewhat unclear to what extent the findings generalize. There are reasons for and against expecting that the findings generalize to how women react to real-life women politicians depending on additional shared identities. More specifically, the experimental realism of the video experiment hinges on respondents engaging with the videos and responding to them as they would have to non-animated role models. Reassuringly, communication research finds that the way people engage with avatars replicates face-to-face behaviors (Nowak & Fox, 2018), and manipulation checks in the experiment confirm that the treatments manipulated perceived similarity with the woman politician in the video based on shared social identities.

In summary, these two experiments were designed to increase internal validity in the study of the influence of additional shared identities as a first step. External validity, and in particular mundane realism, was less prioritized. A panel study could have increased the external validity compared to the survey experiment, but it would be extremely demanding on the requirements for sample size regarding statistical power, especially for examining the interactions between additional shared identities. Second, it would have been difficult to examine the effect of shared identities by itself using panel data since other factors may vary systematically between politicians with different social identities, such as their political behavior. Based on this, the experimental design was chosen to prioritize internal validity and feasibility in terms of statistical power despite its drawbacks in terms of external validity.

3.4 Contexts of the studies

The studies in this dissertation have been carried out in Denmark and the United States. Papers A and B examine perceptions of gendered barriers and the negative effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians in Denmark, whereas paper C examines women politicians' role model effects depending on additional shared identities beyond gender in the United States.

Papers A and B examine the Danish context. Broadly speaking, I expect the Danish context to resemble (Western) European countries with comparable political systems and comparable numbers of women's inclusion in politics. Denmark has a multi-party system in which political parties play a key role in candidate recruitment and nomination (Munk Christiansen et al., 2020). Comparatively, Denmark has a high share of women's political representation (IPU, 2024), although women's political representation is lower in local politics than in national politics (Danmarks Statistik, 2022). Moreover, Denmark has a history of including women in politics without relying on gender quotas (Fiig & Siim, 2020). Nonetheless, there is reason to expect gendered dynamics and barriers in Danish politics. Gender equality is contested in Danish politics and among the population, and recruitment in political parties is gendered (Fiig & Siim, 2020).

The comparatively high share of women politicians in Denmark suggests that young women might perceive less strong gendered barriers compared to other contexts with lower levels of women's inclusion in politics. Furthermore, perceived gendered barriers will likely be experienced differently depending on the specific electoral political context. For instance, it may be experienced differently in contexts with gender quotas, and how the political party arena is perceived as a gendered barrier may also vary in other contexts where parties play a different role in candidate emergence, such as the United States. In extension of this, campaign funding could also be an important perceived gendered barrier in other contexts such as the United States, where candidate funding is

not organized within political parties (Och, 2020). While I expect the specific content of perceived gendered barriers to vary across countries depending on their political systems, I would expect perceived gendered barriers being experienced as discouraging to be a more general psychological mechanism that generalizes more broadly (although this of course remains an empirical question).

Regarding violence against politicians, studies demonstrate that empirical patterns of gender differences in violence against politicians in Denmark resemble those of other countries. More women politicians than men politicians report psychological violence such as harassment, and women politicians also report experiencing more sexualized and gendered political violence (Collignon et al., 2022; Erikson et al., 2023; Håkansson, 2021; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2024; Thomas et al., 2019). Online harassment of politicians has received attention in Danish news media, particularly following the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen raising awareness by sharing examples of the harassment that she receives online (Frederiksen, 2024). This suggests that the survey-experimental estimate of the effect of exposure to online harassment on citizens' perceptions of running for office may be a lower-bound estimate because of pre-treatment effects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012; Slothuus, 2016), and the estimate of citizens' reactions to exposure to online harassment may therefore resemble the reactions of citizens in contexts where the topic has also already received attention, such as the United Kingdom, just to name one country (Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024). On the other hand, the expectation that women will react more strongly than men is based on the psychological mechanism of women being more risk averse than men. Since this is a general psychological mechanism, I would expect this to generalize to other contexts.

Paper C examines the United States. The United States was chosen as the context for examining the effect of additional shared identities with a woman politician beyond gender, since I expect social identities such as racial and partisan identity to be more salient in the American context than the Danish. Studies indicate that more Americans than Europeans

strongly identify with a political party (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2018) and that racial and partisan identity are sources of significant variation in political behavior among women in the United States (Barnes & Cassese, 2017; Brown, 2014; Klar, 2018). With these social identities being highly salient in the United States, finding an effect of additional shared identities in the American context is likely, if there is one. This also implies that if additional shared identities do not increase women politicians' role model effect in the American context, it is likely that they would not do so in Denmark and other contexts either. In terms of women's political representation, the United States is in the middle of the pack. The United States is ranked 77th on women's representation in national parliament globally (IPU, 2024) with 28 percent women in congress. In state legislatures, women make up 33.6 percent (CAWP, 2025). The broad development of women's political representation in the United States can be characterized as a slow increase with notable jumps in 1992 and 2018 (Paxton et al., 2021).

Chapter 4
Findings

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the main results in the dissertation. The presentation of the results is organized around the two parts of the overarching research question. First, I present the results on young women members of political youth parties' perceptions of gendered barriers and how they bring them into their considerations about running for office. Second, I present the results on the extent to which politicians as exemplars of harassment in the political environment and as exemplars of women in the political environment can influence women's perceptions of running for office and nascent political ambition. The chapter focuses on the core findings of the dissertation as a whole.[11] Elaborated results and robustness checks can be found in the individual papers and their appendices.

4.1 Perceived gendered barriers

In Chapter 2, I laid forward a model of women's political ambition as influenced by perceptions of running for office and being a politician in a given political environment. I also argued that women's perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office specifically is a relevant aspect of women's perceptions of running for office that is empirically

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[11]As the chapter summarizes key findings from the individual papers, parts of the description of the results may overlap with the description of the results in the individual papers. It is also important to note that the findings presented in this chapter focus on findings in relation to the guiding research question for the dissertation as a whole. This may differ from the presentation of the findings in the individual papers that each examine a separate research question in their own right.

underexplored. In extension of this, I argued that it is empirically under-explored how women's perceptions of gendered barriers factor into their considerations about running for office. In this section, I present three key findings on this. These findings are based on eight focus group interviews with 28 young women who are members of a political youth party in Denmark.

The first key finding is that the young women perceive gendered barriers towards running for office. The young women perceive gendered barriers in most arenas of the political environment for candidates and politicians, particularly on media coverage, voter interactions online, political debates, and the political sphere more generally. Political parties and gaining voters' electoral support are not seen as clear gendered barriers towards women. Table 4.1 crudely condenses young women's perceptions of gendered barriers.

Table 4.1: Perceptions of gendered barriers

Arena	Perceptions of gendered barriers
Media	Media coverage focuses on women politicians' appearances and family. No clear perceptions of gender differences in volume or tone of media coverage.
Voter interactions	Both men and women politicians receive hostile messages online, but hostility towards women is often gendered or sexualized. Fewer gender differences in voter interactions offline.
Political parties	Getting on the party's list is about qualifications, but it can be easier for women to get on the list as "list fillers" or diversity decoration.
Voter support	Voters are not directly biased against voting for women. Many voters actually want to vote for women.
Political debate contexts	Women are disadvantaged in political debates because of their gender (primarily according to left-leaning women)
Across the political arena	Politics is a masculine sphere in which women have to change to fit in. Women do not feel acknowledged on equal terms with men.

Paper A of this dissertation elaborates on the young women's perceptions of gendered barriers in these different arenas of the political environment. For now (and to avoid an unnecessary lengthy summary), I will restrict myself to describing perceptions of gendered barriers in media coverage of political candidates and politicians to exemplify how these can look.

The discussions on gender differences in media coverage of politicians centered on the content of media coverage, and all groups reached the consensus that women politicians are subject to criticism from the media on appearance, family, and private life to a much larger extent than men politicians. Moreover, the young women described how this felt frustrating since it shifts focus away from what is important and the whole point of being there, namely politics.

> IP2 "I can't remember that the media has ever described what a man was wearing."
>
> IP1 *"Exactly. It doesn't happen to men."*

The second key finding is that the perception of gendered barriers most often was experienced as discouraging towards developing ambition to run for office among the young women. In the conversations about running for office, three aspects of perceived gendered barriers were seen as especially deterrent. They share a common theme in the sense that each is seen as diverting attention away from politics, exposing women to criticism based on their gender and limiting their ability to influence politics. First, perceptions that women politicians are criticized on more arenas than men politicians (e.g., appearance, family, and private life) was experienced as discouraging. Second, gendered or sexualized criticism and harassment of women politicians was experienced as particularly discouraging, since they are perceived as harsher or more unfair than criticism directed at political opinions. Personal, gendered, or sexualized attacks are seen as crossing a line and hindering women's ability to engage in politics. Third, the tone towards women in political debates was experienced as discouraging. The young women described feelings of not being respected, having to fight for equal acknowledgment, and the tone towards them being particularly harsh, which makes them step back since it also gets in the way of influencing politics.

> IP10 "You don't want to be called a stupid bitch. I don't want that myself either, I don't think anyone wants that. I think that's why I stay away from it. Then I would rather keep my opinions to myself."

The perceived gendered barriers that deter young women all erode an important motivation to engage in politics, namely influencing politics. Additionally, organizational roles within political parties often came up in the focus group discussions as part of this discussion. An organizational role in a political party was seen as a channel towards political influence that circumvents many of the perceived costs of being a politician, including gendered barriers.

> IP17 "All the disadvantages we've mentioned now, I also think that's kind of what I can channel into saying, okay, then I can really influence a campaign by standing in the background. Then it's someone else taking the blame in some way. Like, it's someone else's trash can that's being rummaged through, and they're the one who's responsible if something happens. But trying to influence it as much as possible from behind."
> IP16 "Yes."
> IP18 "Yes, exactly."

This adds to the expectations of prior studies that perceived gendered barriers can deter political ambition, with an important extension: Women do not necessarily shy away from politics altogether; they may find other roads towards political influence. Moreover, this suggests that perceived gendered barriers are part of the explanation for why women seem to prefer less visible political roles, and also part of the explanation for why the gender gap in the desire to work for a political party is much smaller than gender gaps in the desire to run for office as a candidate (Ammassari et al., 2022).

The third key finding is two related counter-dynamics to experiencing gendered barriers as discouraging that also emerged in the focus groups. Some discussed that they just did not feel that it was the gendered barriers that would limit their political ambition. Other factors – not unique to women – could limit their political ambition, but gendered barriers were not the primary deterrent. Others discussed how perceived gendered barriers could make them feel provoked, angry, and indignant, which would motivate them to work towards change and fuel their political ambition.

IP28 "No, I think it has the opposite effect on me. Then I can show them that it doesn't matter what I look like, what clothes I wear, or how I present myself. It has something to do with what I say and what my opinions are. I think for me, it kind of does the opposite, but I'm afraid that for some people who don't have as much self-esteem, it does affect them, making them not want to put themselves forward. That's really unfortunate."

IP27 "Definitely. I completely agree with that. I'm also a bit – well, let's say outspoken – and I know how to speak up and raise my voice – and probably shout the loudest, for that matter. I don't think that holds me back. But I'm absolutely sure that some of our members would find it a bit intimidating."

Common to those who did not feel deterred by perceived gendered barriers is that they described themselves as different or tough, and they express fear that it will discourage many other women.

In sum, the focus groups showed that young women members of political youth parties perceive there to be gendered barriers in the political environment. They also bring these perceptions into their considerations about running for office. They react to this perceived inequality in different ways. Most often it is experienced as discouraging from developing the desire to run for office, and related to this, pursuing organizational careers within political parties is seen as a way around gendered barriers. Others refused to let the gendered barriers stop them, and some even felt motivated by them since it made them feel angry. By demonstrating that this expected mechanism occurs, but also by demonstrating two counter-dynamics that extend our understanding, this adds to the expectation of previous literature that a perceived uneven playing field can discourage women from running for office. More broadly, these findings suggest that women's low levels of nascent political ambition can be understood as a response to conditions of running for office in the political environment. These findings also underline the relevance of studying women's perceptions of running for office, as these seem to play into women's political ambition.

4.2 Politicians as exemplars of harassment in the political environment

I now turn to the key findings on the second part of the research question and theoretical argument of this dissertation, namely the extent to which politicians as exemplars can shape both women's perceptions of running for office and their nascent political ambition. I have theorized that politicians as exemplars can illustrate different aspects of the political environment for candidates and politicians and, therefore, influence women's perceptions of running for office and nascent political ambition. The studies in this dissertation focus on two aspects of this: politicians as exemplars of harassment in the political environment and women politicians as exemplars of women in politics more broadly.

The results in this section shed light on the extent to which politicians as exemplars of online harassment in the political environment influence citizens' perceptions of running for office. We know from studies that politicians are subject to substantial amounts of harassment and violence and that this is an unfortunate feature of the political environment for politicians and candidates (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023). Moreover, the findings just presented showed that young women members of youth parties perceive gendered and sexualized harassment to be discouraging for running for office. Several participants backed up their perception of gendered and sexualized harassment with the example of Denmark's current prime minister Mette Frederiksen, who has shared examples of the harassing (and often gendered and sexualized) messages that she receives on social media.

The results in this section extend these findings. The findings are based on a survey experiment employed in a sample of 3,224 nationally representative Danish citizens and examine the discouraging effects among lay citizens more broadly. Moreover, in contrast to the other studies in this dissertation, this experiment includes both men and women citizens, and I can therefore compare the effect on women and men. I

first present the findings among women, and then contrast with the findings among men.

The findings reveal a negative effect of exposure to harassment of politicians online – measured as exposure to a news article with a politician speaking up about the harassment that he or she is subject to – on women's perceptions of running for office. Figure 4.1 shows the effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians on men and women's perceptions of running for office. The outcomes measure three aspects of perceptions of running for office: 1) perceiving online harassment as a reason against running, 2) perceptions of running as a candidate measured as how one would advise a friend about running for office, and 3) perceptions of being in office.

Figure 4.1: Negative effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians
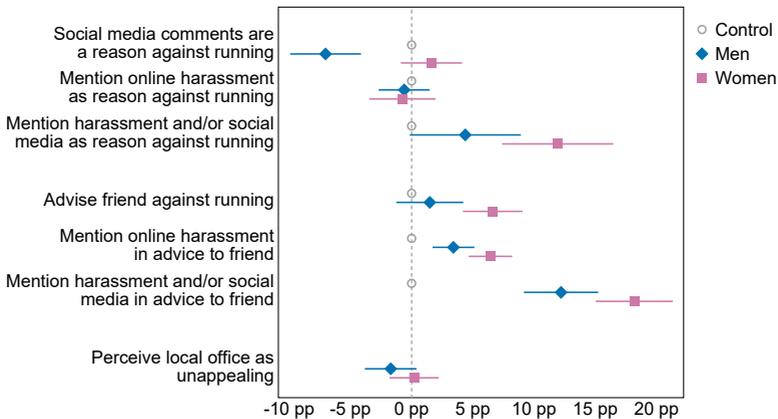
Exposure to online harassment of politicians does not make women rate social media comments as a stronger reason against running on the closed-scale item, and they do not become more likely to mention online harassment when asked to freely list reasons against running in an open-ended question. However, women do become 12 percentage points more

likely to mention harassment and social media more broadly as reasons against running in the open-ended question, which is a substantial effect. Thus, the findings differ between the closed item and the open-ended question. The fact that exposure to online harassment does not increase the rating of social media comments as a reason against running on the closed scale likely reflects that this is already rated as a very strong reason against running. Among women in the control group not exposed to the treatment, social media comments were rated as the third-strongest reason against running among eight items, with an average of 0.7 on a 0–1 scale, where 1 represents a very substantial reason against running.

Women's perceptions of running for office as a candidate are clearly negatively influenced by exposure to online harassment of politicians. Women exposed to online harassment become 6.6 percentage points more likely to advise their friend against running on the closed scale measure, and in the open-ended advice to a friend considering running for office, they also become 6.4 percentage points more likely to mention online harassment and 18.2 percentage points more likely to mention harassment or social media. Thus, online harassment is clearly a relevant issue that women bring into their considerations about running for office as a candidate when exposed to a political exemplar illustrating the issue.

Women's perceptions of being a city council member as meaningful or appealing are not substantially or significantly influenced by exposure to online harassment of politicians. The reduced appeal of running for office – contrasted with the unchanged appeal of serving as a politician – may reflect expectations that elected officials receive support in managing online harassment. It may also indicate that citizens differentiate between campaigning and holding office, with harassment perceived as most intense during election campaigns.

Taken together, these findings indicate that exposure to online harassment of politicians primes an already strong perception that online harassment is a cost of running for office among women. Women exposed are more likely to mention online harassment when advising a friend considering candidacy and more inclined to discourage them from running.

However, exposure does not appear to alter perceptions of being a politician in office. The combination of previous studies' findings (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024) and the present findings indicate that while the deterring effects cannot be immediately measured on nascent political ambition, they can negatively influence women's perceptions of running for office. As discussed in the theory section, these broader perceptions of running for office likely shape political ambition.

In stark contrast to the effects among women, exposure to online harassment of politicians has a significantly weaker effect on men's perceptions of running for office. On all outcomes with a main effect, the effect is significantly more negative on women than on men, as shown in Figure 4.1. When exposed to online harassment of politicians, women are 6.6 percentage points more likely to advise their friends against running for office; men are no more likely to advise their friend against running for office. Women mention online harassment 6.4 percentage points more often in their advice to friend; men are only 3.4 percentage points more likely to mention online harassment. Moreover, men are *less* likely to perceive social media comments as a reason against running for office after exposure to online harassment of politicians. This seems to be a counter-dynamic among men who refuse to let online harassment stop them. The open-text responses indicate that the reason that men become more likely to mention online harassment in their advice to their friend but not more likely to advise their friend against running for office is that they do not consider online harassment as something that should be an obstacle. For instance, one man wrote the following: "Do it and ignore everyone who's sending hate messages. You're better than that."

The findings thus indicate that men acknowledge the presence of online harassment of politicians, as evidenced by the increase in mentioning harassment in their open-text responses. However, they do not seem to react negatively to the online harassment, as evidenced by the counter-reaction in rating social media as a reason against running and by no change in how they would advise a friend considering running for office.

In contrast, women both acknowledge the presence of online harassment of politicians and react negatively to it by advising their friends against running for office.

These results suggest that politicians as exemplars of harassment in the political environment for candidates and politicians negatively shape especially women's perceptions of running for office. The negative effects among the citizens witnessing the harassment are gendered in the sense that women are more negatively affected than men. Parallel to these findings, other studies have found that both men and women politicians are affected by violence and harassment, but women politicians often report being more affected (Collignon and Rüdig, 2021; Institut for Menneskerettigheder, 2021; Pedersen, Petersen, and Thau, 2025; Pedersen et al., 2021, although see Erikson et al., 2023; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2024). These findings all underline the gendered consequences of online harassment of politicians.

The experiment was also designed to test the effects of sexualized and gendered harassment compared to non-sexualized and non-gendered harassment. The findings clearly show that sexualized and gendered online harassment of politicians does *not* have stronger negative effects than non-sexualized and non-gendered online harassment of politicians, as illustrated in Figure 4.2.

This runs contrary to the theoretical expectations. Theoretically, I expected sexualized and gendered harassment to have stronger negative effects since it is perceived as more severe. Manipulation checks confirm that the sexualized and gendered harassment was perceived as 6 percentage points more severe. Nonetheless, this did not create a stronger negative effect. An explanation for this could be that the non-sexualized and non-gendered online harassment is perceived as sufficiently severe to stimulate negative effects on perceptions of running for office, whereas the increased severity of the sexualized and gendered harassment does not strengthen the negative effect. Supporting this interpretation, the results show that in terms of perceived severity, sexualized and gendered treatments as well as non-sexualized and non-gendered treatments are

Figure 4.2: Sexualized and gendered harassment is *not* more deterring
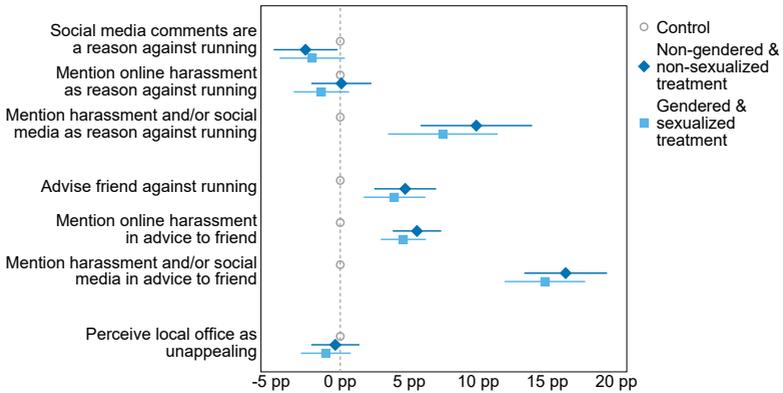
The figure shows the effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians on both men and women.

both rated above 0.6 on average on a scale from 0 (not at all harsh) to 1 (extremely harsh). In any case, these results indicate that sexualized and gendered harassment itself does not have stronger negative effects.

This suggests that the finding from the focus group interviews – the perception that women are subject to more sexualized and gendered hostility online and that this is perceived as discouraging towards developing political ambition – may be part of a broader tendency, where it is not only gendered and sexualized online harassment but rather online harassment of politicians more broadly that negatively influences citizens', and particularly women's, considerations about running for office. In combination with the findings of stronger negative effects among women than men, these findings underline the gendered consequences of online harassment of politicians – independently of any gendered character of the harassment.

4.3 Politicians as exemplars of women in the political environment

Politics is known to be perceived as a masculine environment (Bos et al., 2022). The findings from the focus group study with young women members of political youth parties also showed a perception of politics as a masculine sphere in which women have to change to fit in and in which women are not acknowledged on equal terms with men. Women politicians as exemplars of women in politics (or role models) are theoretically expected to change such perceptions of politics being a man's world (see, e.g., Alexander, 2012; Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2025; Karp and Banducci, 2008). As I have theorized in Chapter 2, the presence of women politicians are not only expected to change such perceptions of gendered barriers. They are also expected to increase political interest, efficacy, and ambition among women directly without altering perceptions of running for office first. They are expected to do so through vicarious learning and by being inspirations. This effect is expected to be particularly strong when more salient social identities are shared with a woman politician exemplar.

In this section, I present the main findings from two survey experiments conducted among women in the United States that focus on women politicians' role model effects on women's political interest, internal political efficacy, and nascent political ambition depending on additional shared identities beyond gender. Based on social psychological role model theory stating that a role model's effect on individuals' aspirations is influenced by identification with the role model, and an expectation based on social identity theory that individuals are better able to identify with those who share their salient social identities, I first examine whether women are better able to relate to politicians when they share more salient social identities. I examined this with a conjoint experiment in which participants were asked to rate how relatable they perceived different politicians to be. Figure 4.3 shows the influence

of the different shared social identities on how relatable a politician is
perceived to be. Women perceive women politicians as 5.4 percentage

Figure 4.3: Average marginal component effect of shared identities on
perceiving a politician as relatable
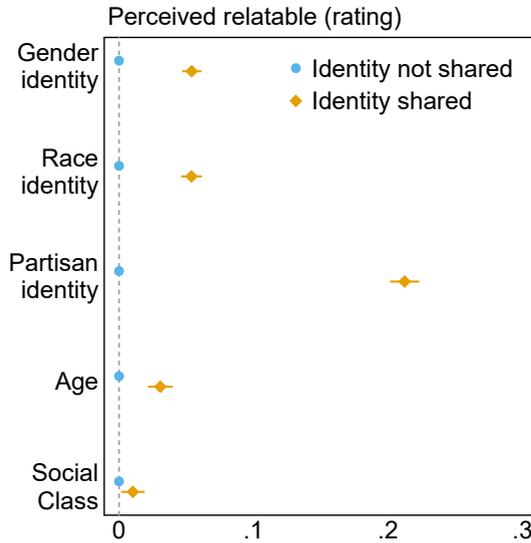
points more relatable than men politicians (following the outcome scaling from 0 to 1, the coefficient of 0.054 corresponds to an effect size of
5.4 percentage points). Politicians of the same racial identity as the respondent are rated 5.4 percentage points more relatable than politicians
with a different racial identity, and a politician from the same party is
on average rated 21 percentage points more relatable than a politician
from another party. Shared age has a substantially small effect of 3 percentage points, and shared class identity has an even smaller effect of 1
percentage point. In full, this supports the conclusion that shared identities increase perceiving a politician as relatable. A woman politician
with no other shared identities beyond gender is on average perceived as
just above 0.3 relatable on a scale from 0 (cannot relate at all) to 1 (can
relate very much), whereas a woman politician with shared age, social

class, racial, and partisan identity is perceived as twice as relatable on the same scale. Moreover, shared gender, racial, and partisan identity are the strongest drivers of perceiving a politician as relatable among these five social identities.

Next, a video vignette experiment examines whether women politicians with additional shared identities have stronger role model effects on women's own political interest, internal political efficacy, and nascent political ambition. The animated video treatments tell a story about a woman politician, Alicia, and how she became politically engaged. Across treatment conditions, Alicia's racial and partisan identity is varied so that respondents either see a version with the same racial and partisan identity as themselves (woman politician with more shared identities treatment) or a version with a different racial and partisan identity as themselves (woman politician with no other shared identities treatment). The control group did not see any treatment video.

Before diving into the results, it is worth noting that the factual and subjective manipulation checks confirm that the treatment videos delivered a strong treatment. Between 89 and 99 percent correctly recalled the gender (99 percent correct), racial identity (89 percent correct), and partisan identity (89 percent correct) of the politician in the video. Furthermore, the group that saw a video of a woman politician with shared racial and partisan identity perceived themselves as substantially more similar to the politician (diff. 11.6 percentage points) and indicated that they were better able to relate to the politician (diff. 11.3 percentage points) compared to the group that saw a woman politician with a different racial and partisan identity. Thus, the treatment clearly manipulated perceived similarity and relatability, and these results replicate the pattern from the conjoint experiment.

Nonetheless, Figure 4.4 shows that exposure to the treatment video featuring a woman politician produces the same effects on women's interest in politics, internal political efficacy, and nascent political ambi-

tion regardless of whether other identities beyond gender are shared.[12] Although women politicians who share partisan or racial identities are perceived as more relatable and similar to oneself, they do not produce stronger role model effects on women's subsequent political engagement. Even among the strongest racial and partisan identifiers, where shared identities increase identification with a politician the most, the additional shared identities do not translate into a stronger role model effect on women's own political dispositions.[13]

Figure 4.4: Effect of woman politician on women's political engagement depending on additional shared identities
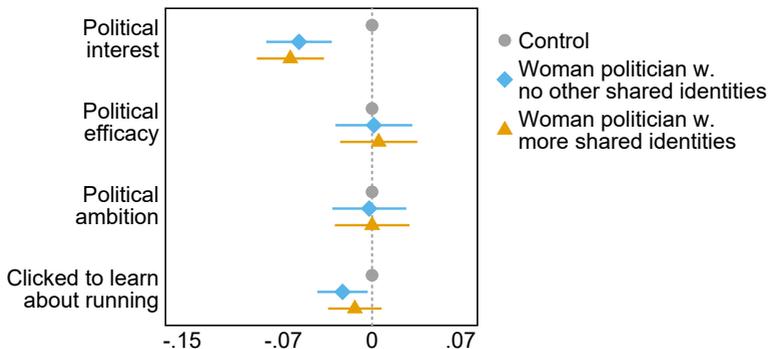
Moreover, these findings show that this one-shot exposure to the story of how an ordinary woman became a politician did not have a positive role model effect on women's political engagement. Women's internal political efficacy, whether one feels capable of and qualified to participate in politics, was not positively influenced by the treatment video. Women's nascent political ambition, measured as both clicking on a link

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[12]Note that this is not a function of no main effect of the video. In paper C, I show the results for White and Black women separately. These results show that White women's political engagement is somewhat positively influenced by exposure to the video treatment, whereas Black women's political engagement is negatively influenced. Among both White and Black women, the treatment effect is the same across additional shared identities.

[13]See the exploratory analysis of this in Appendix B.4 of paper C.

to learn more about running for office and as survey items on whether women can see themselves as politically active one day, was not positively influenced by the video either. Surprisingly, women's interest in political issues in their local area was negatively influenced by the treatment video. This clearly suggests that this one-shot video treatment with a woman politician as an exemplar of women in politics was not enough to counter gendered political socialization and stimulate women's political interest and ambition.

Chapter 5
Discussion

In this dissertation, I set out to examine how women's perceptions of running for office shape their nascent political ambition and to what extent politicians as exemplars shape these perceptions and political ambition. In this chapter, I discuss what we can learn about women's inclination to run for office from the dissertation. To do so, I first summarize the empirical findings, and then, I turn to discussing the limitations, contributions to research, and broader societal implications of the findings.

5.1   Synthesis of findings

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that women's perceptions of running for office in a given political environment are relevant for understanding their low levels of nascent political ambition and that politicians as exemplars of different aspects of the political environment shape these perceptions and political ambition. The findings of this dissertation largely support this argument, and highlight how women's perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office play into their considerations about running for office, and secondly that politicians as exemplars of different aspects of the political environment can change women's perceptions of running for office. This extends prior understandings of how the political environment in which women consider running plays a role in understanding women's nascent political ambition.

Regarding perceptions of running for office, I find that young women perceive gendered barriers towards running for office and bring these

perceived gendered barriers into their considerations about running. This indicates support for the broader theoretical argument that perceptions of running for office, including perceived costs and benefits of running, may factor into the development of ambition to run, as also argued by others (Shames, 2017). However, it is important to note that the findings of the dissertation do not address the entire argument. One perceived gendered barrier that is brought into considerations about running for office is a perception that online harassment towards women politicians is often gendered and sexualized in a way that online harassment of men politicians is not, which is often experienced as discouraging. Relatedly, findings from paper B show that comments on social media, also more broadly, are perceived as a cost of running for office among both men and women. This suggests that this perceived gendered barrier taps into and adds onto a general perceived cost of running for office that is not unique to women but may be experienced more strongly as a cost of running among women. In relation to this, it is important to note that based on the findings in this dissertation, I cannot say how important or influential perceived gendered barriers are relative to other perceived costs and benefits of running for office. However, the findings do show that perceived gendered barriers play into women's considerations about running for office in their own right.

Regarding politicians as exemplars of the political environment, the findings of the dissertation demonstrate that politicians as exemplars of online harassment towards politicians in the political environment can negatively influence women's perceptions of running for office and make women more likely to advise their friends against running. However, the findings also indicate that women politicians as exemplars of women in politics (as role models) cannot easily stimulate women's nascent political ambition. Specifically, a role model video experiment did not produce positive changes in women's nascent political ambition, even when the woman political exemplar also shared racial and partisan identity with the observer. This clearly suggests that women politicians are not only positive exemplars of what it entails to engage in politics.

Taken together, these findings may also suggest that politicians as exemplars of negative aspects of the political environment could be more influential than positive exemplars. Prior research demonstrates a negativity bias, that is, a general tendency for humans to react more strongly to negative than to positive information (Soroka et al., 2019). While the evidence in the dissertation is by no means conclusive on this, the findings suggest that negative exemplars may be more influential on women's orientations towards running for office than positive exemplars, in line with the general negativity bias. On the other hand, the negative effects of politicians as exemplars of harassment and no positive effect of women politicians as exemplars of women in politics could also reflect the different outcomes in the two studies. The study of women politicians as role models focuses on the effects on nascent political ambition, which I would expect is harder to influence in a survey experiment than perceptions of running for office, which is the outcome in the experiment on politicians as exemplars of harassment.

Nonetheless, the findings of the dissertation extend prior studies by demonstrating that politicians can also function as exemplars of negative aspects of the political environment for politicians and candidates. In extension of this, the findings from the dissertation also point towards that perceived gendered barriers may also stem from political exemplars. In the focus group conversations with young women party members, several interviewees backed up their perception of gendered barriers with examples of Danish women politicians. One reoccurring example was the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen, who they brought up to back up their perception of gendered and sexualized online harassment towards women politicians. This suggests that the Danish prime minister is not only a positive role model of being a successful woman politician. She also exemplifies the costs of being a successful woman politician in the form of harsh treatment from the surroundings. This underlines the finding that women politicians may serve as cautionary exemplars, illustrating the costs of being a politician.

Finally, the findings in this dissertation also extend our knowledge on gendered consequences of online harassment towards politicians. The focus group study demonstrates that young women perceive gendered and sexualized harassment as a cost of running for office that is especially strong for women. They also bring this into their considerations about running for office, and it is often experienced as discouraging. Since the focus group study focused specifically on perceptions of gendered barriers, these results cannot speak to whether non-gendered and non-sexualized harassment of politicians is experienced as equally discouraging. However, the experimental findings on the effect of exposure to online harassment can address this since the experiment compares the negative effects of sexualized and gendered versus non-sexualized and non-gendered harassment. These results suggest that online harassment of politicians is discouraging to women independently of any gendered or sexualized character of the harassment. The results from my dissertation as a whole suggest that online harassment of politicians has gendered consequences independently of any gendered character of the online harassment. The consequences are gendered in the sense that women are more negatively influenced than men. Moreover, this is a broader tendency that is not limited to harassment that is gendered and sexualized in its character.

5.2 Limitations

Before elaborating on the implications of these findings, it is important to outline the limitations of the findings. Four central choices of the dissertation in particular deserve elaboration in this section.

First, the dissertation revolves around explanations to women's nascent political ambition. It is important to note that nascent political ambition is not a direct behavioral measure of whether individuals will run for office at some point during their lives. Rather, it captures whether women can imagine themselves running for office one day, which says something about how women experience their role in the political sys-

tem. Moreover, nascent political ambition is a crucial stepping stone for actually running for office (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025; Fox & Lawless, 2005). Furthermore, studying perceptions of running for office is taking another step back in the theoretical mechanism. This is a relevant step to take since few women have any nascent political ambition, and therefore, examining the underlying perceptions of running for office provides a more sensitive measure, which also gets at how women experience the political environment and their opportunities to run for office.

Second, the studies in this dissertation examine primarily women. The study of women's nascent political ambition is motivated by the persistent gender gaps in nascent political ambition between men and women. Even when motivated by these gender gaps, I find it relevant to examine women's nascent political ambition by itself to understand it in depth and on its own without comparing it to men. More specifically, in paper A, I prioritized achieving saturated data on women's perceptions of gendered barriers over including men in the focus groups (which would likely have changed the conversation dynamics and made women more silent (Karpowitz et al., 2012)) or contrasting with focus groups with men only. Both alternatives would have produced less saturated data on women's perceptions of gendered barriers. I chose this since it is women's perceptions of gendered barriers in themselves that can limit women's development of nascent political ambition. Regarding the gender gap, this leaves the open question whether men also perceive similar gendered barriers towards running for office that limit their development of nascent political ambition. As reviewed in Chapter 2, studies of "objective" gender barriers generally point towards barriers towards women in media coverage, political parties, interactions with voters, and broadly across the political sphere. Only studies of outright voter biases point towards a small pro-women vote bias. I would argue that this makes it less likely to believe that men would perceive similar gendered barriers towards running for office that limit their development of nascent political ambition. Therefore, I would expect that addressing the underlying

causes of perceived gendered barriers would stimulate women's political ambition and also narrow the gender gap.

The paper on women politicians' role model effects also only examines women. The paper examines women politicians' role model effects on women depending on additional shared identities. In the review of prior studies, I identified this as an important contribution to the literature. With this in mind, a sufficiently large sample of women to examine the effect of additional shared identities with women politicians with sufficient statistical power was prioritized over comparing with a sample of men. Theoretically, women politicians are expected to have role model effects on women's – and not men's – political interest and ambition (Atkeson, 2003; Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025). The reason is that women politicians change stereotypes about the political domain to be more inclusive to women, which is only expected to change women's behavior (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025).

Third, the studies in this dissertation have prioritized internal validity and in-depth descriptions over external validity. The experimental studies in this dissertation have been designed with a special attention to internal validity. For instance, the mundane realism of the conjoint experiment and the video experiment with animated figures can be discussed.[14] Equally, the focus group study prioritized exploratory, in-depth knowledge of perceived gendered barriers and *how* these factor into considerations about running for office over representative data on perceptions of gendered barriers among all youth party members. I believe that the work presented in this dissertation presents important steps within the research agendas that each paper addresses, but I also find it important to acknowledge the limitations in terms of generalizability in particular. Therefore, important next steps will be to examine the research questions with designs aimed at exploring the generalizability of the findings. For instance, future work could test how widespread perceived gendered barriers are among all party members or lay citizens, whether the different mechanisms of perceived gendered barriers influencing political

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[14]See the elaborated discussion of this in Chapter 3.

ambition also travel from youth party members to adult party members, whether shared identities also do not increase women politicians' role model effects outside the experimental setting, or how repeated exposure to online harassment of politicians affects citizens' perceptions of running for office in the long term.

Fourth, the studies of this dissertation have been carried out in Denmark and the United States. While these are two quite different countries, a gender gap in nascent political ambition is present in both Denmark and the United States (Dahl & Nyrup, 2021; Fox & Lawless, 2024; Kjaer & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). On a broad level, I would expect politicians as exemplars of the political environment to be a general psychological mechanism that applies across Denmark, the United States, and other Western democracies. I would expect that exactly what aspects of the political environment that politicians illustrate (i.e., the specific signal politicians send) to differ across countries depending of the political context, election system, norms around women's political inclusion, and so on. However, I would expect the generalized mechanism of politicians as exemplars of the political environment to travel widely. Consistent with such an expectation, prior studies have found role model effects of women politicians across countries such as the United States, Switzerland, and India (Beaman et al., 2012; Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Gilardi, 2015). In contrast, I expect specific perceptions of running for office to vary based on context. For instance, the specific perceptions of gendered barriers uncovered in paper A are tightly linked to the Danish political context, but the reactions to any perceived gendered barriers as discouraging (or stimulating among a minority of self-confident women) could be similar in other contexts with perceived gendered barriers, and the content of perceived gendered barriers will likely also have similarities in countries with comparable political systems.

5.3 Contributions and directions for future research

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on women's nascent political ambition (Lawless & Fox, 2010; Shames et al., 2020). In a literature where much work has focused on socialization, gender roles, and women's low perceived self-qualifications to run for office (Bos et al., 2022; Lawless & Fox, 2010; Schneider & Bos, 2019), I follow recent studies in bringing forward the perspective of the political environment and women's perceptions of running for office (DeMora et al., 2023; Shames, 2017; Shames et al., 2020).

The studies in this dissertation suggest that perceptions of the political environment for candidates and politicians deserve attention as an explanation for women's desire to run for office. Findings underline that perceptions of gendered barriers in the political environment for candidates and politicians are a relevant consideration that women bring into their development of political ambition. This speaks to a model of political ambition as influenced by the perceived costs and benefits of running for office in a given political environment (Och, 2020; Shames, 2017). Future studies may focus on expanding our understanding of which specific aspects in the political environment for candidates and politicians that discourage and attract potential candidates. In other words, the perceived costs and benefits of running for office (Shames, 2017). For instance, perceptions that women are criticized on their appearance, family, and private life to a larger extent than men in media coverage of political candidates were experienced as discouraging to young women. An important extension of this could be examining the extent to which media coverage of political candidates more generally is perceived as discouraging among both men and women. Pursuing a research agenda of perceptions of running for office could help bring answers to how we can structure a political environment that does not deter politically interested women or that might even attract potential candidates. This is an impor-

tant societal question in a time when political parties across Europe are experiencing a steep membership decline, which is already shrinking the candidate recruitment pool (Van Biezen et al., 2012).

The findings of this dissertation on politicians as exemplars of the political environment also carry implications for theories of political role models (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2025; Schneider & Holman, 2020; Sweet-Cushman, 2023). The finding that exposure to harassment of politicians can negatively influence women's perceptions of running for office suggests that women politicians are not only positive role models. To the contrary, the findings indicate that politicians can also unwillingly serve as cautionary examples by illustrating the costs of being a politician resulting from the harsh treatment by others. Moreover, women politicians can also illustrate the costs of running for office that are unique to women. This suggests that studies of the role model effects of women politicians need to take into consideration what women politicians are actually signaling about being a woman in politics. Features of the political environment for politicians, politicians' working conditions, and the surroundings' (gendered) treatment of politicians will be important to take into account when evaluating this (Fox & Lawless, 2024). We cannot take for granted or assume that women politicians send a positive signal about being a woman in politics.

A central challenge to studying women's nascent political ambition is that few women have any ambition to run for office (Fox & Lawless, 2024). This means that it is a variable with low variation, and among lay women, few will have seriously considered running for office. The studies in this dissertation tackle this challenge in two ways. In examining how perceptions of gendered barriers factor into considerations about running for office, I examine youth party members rather than lay women since youth party members are more likely to have considered running for office and have therefore developed considerations about this. Several other studies of women's nascent political ambition likewise shift focus from the general population to party members or elite women in pipeline professions (Ammassari et al., 2022; Höhmann et al., 2025;

Lawless & Fox, 2010; Shames, 2017). In examining any discouraging effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians, I bring forward a second solution to this challenge. I shift focus from nascent political ambition to underlying perceptions of running for office, which, as discussed in the theoretical chapter, are likely to shape nascent political ambition. As I have argued, the null findings of prior studies examining the deterring effects of exposure to online harassment of politicians (Pedersen, Thau, & Petersen, 2025; Vrielink & Van der Pas, 2024) could potentially reflect that citizens have very low levels of political ambition, meaning that an experiment might not be able to lower nascent political ambition any further. To address this concern, I studied the negative effects on citizens' underlying perceptions of running for office, measured as how citizens would advise a friend about running for office, among other things. This makes it possible to identify any negative effects since the base levels are substantially higher. I believe that studying perceptions of running for office presents a new approach and a more granular measure that can capture variation in orientations towards running for office among lay citizens. This enables examining why some might consider running for office and, in particular, why others would never consider it.

5.4 Societal implications

Findings uncovered in this dissertation indicate that women's low levels of political ambition can be understood as a response to what it entails to engage in politics (as a woman). The findings show that perceived gendered barriers towards running for office and online harassment of politicians discourage women from politics. On the other hand, a role model video treatment with a woman politician could not merely by resembling women stimulate political interest and ambition. This has important consequences for how to increase women's nascent political ambition. Others have suggested that rather than encouraging women to "lean in", changing the political landscape will be more effective (Och, 2020; Piscopo, 2019; Shames, 2017). The findings of this dissertation

likewise suggest that minimizing the costs of running for office could be effective in increasing women's political ambition.

Specifically, minimizing perceived gendered barriers could be an effective measure towards increasing women's political ambition. To the extent that the perceived barriers reflect actual obstacles to women candidates and politicians, this will require changing structures in the political environment, and to the extent that perceived gendered barriers are perceptions out of touch with reality, correcting any misperceptions can be effective. The findings of this dissertation indicate that the perceived gendered barriers that felt most discouraging were a harsh tone towards women in political debates, sexualized and gendered harassment online, and criticism of women in more arenas, such as appearance, family, and private life, on both social media and in traditional news media. Prior studies indicate that these perceptions are rooted in reality. In studies of Danish local representatives, women politicians report experiencing more psychological and sexual violence than men politicians, including sexualized messages and comments online, and women politicians also experience inappropriate comments on their clothing, body, appearance, gender, and private life more often than men (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2024; Pedersen et al., 2021). The perceived gendered barriers thus seem to originate from actual gendered dynamics in the political environment, and therefore, addressing the perceived gendered barriers will require changing these structural barriers in the political environment. An important public conversation on one aspect of this, namely harassment towards politicians, is currently ongoing (see, e.g., Flyvbjerg et al., 2024; Jenvall, 2024; Trolle, 2025). In addition to this, these findings also point towards media coverage of politicians and the tone in the political debate as points to pay attention to going forward.

The findings in this dissertation also suggest that addressing online harassment of politicians more broadly, and not only online harassment that is gendered or sexualized in its form, can be effective in making women more positive towards running for office. The findings show that independent of any gendered or sexualized character of online ha-

rassment, women's perceptions of running for office are negatively influenced by witnessing online harassment of politicians – and women are significantly more negatively affected than men. Therefore, addressing online harassment of politicians could be effective in closing the gender gap in the desire to run for office. As mentioned, a public debate on harassment of politicians both online and offline is currently ongoing, and the findings in this dissertation underline that this conversation is important to have and pursue, especially since the online harassment of politicians seem to discourage women more than men and, thus, has gendered consequences.

Moreover, the findings of this dissertation do not point towards a positive circle in which women in politics will inspire more women to run for office. A role model video intervention with a woman politician failed to produce any positive change in women's nascent political ambition. On the contrary, women politicians exemplifying the costs of running for office, such as online harassment, seem to negatively influence women's perceptions of running for office. This suggests that women politicians are not necessarily positive role models; rather, they can also (unwillingly) become exemplars of the negative aspects of the political environment for candidates and politicians. This indicates that we cannot rely on women becoming inspired by seeing someone similar to themselves in politics as an effective solution towards closing the gender gap in nascent political ambition. Rather, minimizing the costs of running for office for women seems to be a more effective way forward.

Summary

In this dissertation, I examine explanations to women's desire to run for office. The study is motivated by the fact that women have had political rights equal to men's for a century in countries such as Denmark and the United States, and nonetheless, fewer women than men could imagine running for political office. I examine the role of perceptions of running for office in a given political environment and advance the argument that women's perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office, as well as politicians as exemplars of the political environment, are important to understand women's nascent political ambition.

The theoretical framework combines perspectives on gendered barriers with exemplification theory. I argue that perceptions of gendered barriers towards running for office – such as perceptions that media coverage of women politicians focus on appearances more often than media coverage of men politicians – play a role in explaining women's desire to run for office. Second, I build on exemplification theory to argue that politicians serve as exemplars of the political environment, illustrating both opportunities and obstacles. Politicians can act as role models, signaling that women can succeed in politics, but they may also serve as cautionary examples when they exemplify the costs of political engagement, such as online harassment of politicians.

The empirical findings of the dissertation build on three papers, each employing complementary methods. Through focus group interviews with young women members of political youth parties, I explore perceptions of gendered barriers. The young women described gendered barriers towards running for office across different arenas of the political environment, for instance, media coverage focusing more on women politi-

cians' appearances and private life compared to media coverage of men politicians. These perceived gendered barriers were often experienced as discouraging from developing the ambition to run for office, especially when the barriers were seen as undermining women's ability to influence politics. Through a vignette experiment with a nationally representative sample of Danish citizens, I show that exposure to online harassment of politicians negatively influence perceptions of running for office, particularly among women, who are more likely than men to advise friends against entering politics after learning about online harassment. Finally, through survey experiments with American women, I explore role model effects of women politicians as exemplars of successful women in politics and to what extent role model effects may depend on additional shared identities with the woman politician. Although women perceived women politicians with more shared identities (e.g., racial or partisan identity) as more relatable, a video intervention portraying a woman politician's pathway to office did not increase women's political interest, efficacy, or ambition, even when racial and partisan identity were also shared.

Taken together, the findings suggest that perceptions of the political environment in which women consider running shape women's nascent political ambition and that politicians as exemplars of the political environment can shape such perceptions of running for office. Importantly, women politicians cannot be assumed to inspire more women to enter politics. They may also exemplify the costs of being a politician, such as harassment, and thus deter potential candidates. The dissertation therefore challenges assumptions of a virtuous cycle in which increased representation leads directly to greater ambition among women. Instead, the findings imply that structural changes to minimize the costs of running for office – such as reducing online harassment and countering perceptions of gendered barriers – are more effective pathways for closing the gender gap in political ambition.

Dansk resumé

I denne afhandling undersøger jeg kvinders lyst til at stille op til politiske valg. Motivationen bag afhandlingen er en konstatering af, at selv i lande som Danmark og USA, hvor kvinder har haft politiske rettigheder på lige fod med mænd i mere end et århundrede, har færre kvinder end mænd lyst til at stille op til valg.

Gennem afhandlingen undersøger jeg to centrale perspektiver som forklaringer på kvinders lyst til at stille op til valg: opfattelser af kønnede barrierer i det politiske miljø og politikere som eksempler på det politiske miljø for politikere og kandidater. Opfattelser af kønnede barrierer forstås som opfattelser af ulige muligheder og ulige fordele og omkostninger ved at være kandidat og politiker, eksempelvis kønnet mediedækning af kvindelige politikere, og jeg argumenterer for, at sådanne opfattelser af det politiske miljø vil spille ind i kvinders lyst til at stille op til valg. Dernæst argumenterer jeg for, at politikere som eksempler på forskellige aspekter af det politiske miljø, fx chikane eller kvinders succes i politik, kan illustrere både muligheder og forhindringer, hvilket former både kvinders opfattelser af og lyst til at stille op i politik.

Empirisk bygger afhandlingen på tre studier. Igennem fokusgruppeinterviews med kvindelige ungdomspartimedlemmer viser jeg, at de unge kvinder oplever kønnede barrierer på tværs af forskellige arenaer af politik, hvilket ofte opleves som afskrækkende for deres lyst til at stille op. Gennem survey-eksperimenter viser jeg, at politikeres vidnesbyrd om den online chikane, de udsættes for, påvirker opfattelsen af det at stille op i politik negativt, særligt blandt kvinder. Endelig viser survey-eksperimenter i USA, at kvinder opfatter kvindelige politikere som mere relaterbare, når de har flere sociale identiteter til fælles, men også at pos-

itive eksempler på kvindelige politikeres vej ind i politik ikke uden videre øger kvinders lyst til at stille op, selvom de har flere sociale identiteter til fælles med de kvindelige politikere.

På baggrund af dette konkluderer jeg, at opfattelser af det politiske miljø spiller en rolle for at forstå af kvinders lyst til at stille op i politik. Opfattelser af kønnede barrierer og politikere, der illustrerer chikane, kan medvirke til at afskrække kvinder fra politik, hvorfor ændringer i det politiske miljø kan være en effektiv vej frem for at få flere kvinder til at stille op i politik og opnå mere ligelig politisk repræsentation.

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