

All Ambition is Local: News Consumption and the Decision to Run for Office

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Abstract

Why do people run for office? Standard political science explanations focus on two main factors – the political opportunity structure and the process of socialization. There has been little attention, however, to the role the information environment plays in shaping political ambition. This is a significant omission at a time when changes to the U.S. media landscape have had profound effects on American politics. We develop a framework to explain how political information – in this case, news coverage – can affect interest in running for office. We argue that exposure to local news, in particular, is critical because most opportunities to run exist at the local level. Across numerous surveys of the general U.S. public and a large-scale sample of potential candidates, we show that consumption of local news predicts interest in running for office. We also demonstrate that exposure to high-quality local news sources – outlets that devote significant attention to substantive issues – is an especially strong correlate of political ambition. These findings have implications for theoretical accounts of candidate emergence and suggest that the decline of local news may alter the pool of people who decide to run for office in the United States.

Paper prepared for the Summer 2025 National Capital Area Political Science Association American Politics Workshop. We thank the Hewlett Foundation and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism for funding.

Why do people run for office? Given the more than 500,000 elective positions in the United States, this question has animated research for decades. Political scientists tend to focus on two major explanations. One emphasizes the “political opportunity structure.” That is, potential candidates respond strategically to favorable political and structural conditions. When an incumbent retires and an open seat is available, or when the partisan composition of a district matches that of an aspiring candidate, a person contemplating a bid for elective office is more likely to emerge. The second explanation – defined broadly as socialization – homes in on the way that potential candidates’ personal backgrounds, professional experiences, connections to politics, and perceived qualifications shape their interest in running. These two explanations often work in tandem, since only potential candidates who are socialized to think about entering the electoral arena ever have reason to consider the political opportunity structure.

There has been little attention, however, to the role the information environment plays in shaping political ambition. This is a significant omission at a time when changes to the U.S. media landscape have had profound effects on American politics. The rise of the internet and the nationalization of Americans’ media habits have altered how people get information, the content of the information they see, and how they turn that information into political action. Although a handful of studies suggests a relationship between these developments and candidate emergence (Rubado and Jennings 2020; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2013), there has been no systematic effort to explain how broader patterns of information acquisition may influence people’s interest in running for office. This is especially surprising because launching a campaign is fundamentally an act of political participation, and scholars have long known that informational forces are central to explaining broader patterns of political engagement.

In this paper, we develop a framework to explain how political information – in this case, news coverage – can affect interest in running for office. We argue that exposure to local news, in

particular, is critical to the development of political ambition. The vast majority of elective offices are situated at the local level, and the vast majority of political careers begin at the local level. Thus, consuming local media can provide potential candidates with the background and knowledge about their local government that may mobilize them to consider a candidacy. Consumption of national news, however, should increase ambition less consistently because it does not help people connect issues and problems to the political context where opportunities to run exist. Consequently, people who regularly consume local news should be more likely to develop an interest in running for office than those who don't.

To test this argument, we draw on data from multiple sources: nationally representative surveys, statewide surveys, and a large-scale study of potential candidates. Across these data sets, we show that consumption of local news is strongly related to political ambition in general and interest in running for local office specifically. National news consumption, on the other hand, is a weak and inconsistent predictor of whether people express interest in a local candidacy, although we do find it is associated with potential candidates' ambition to seek national or statewide office. In addition, we demonstrate that exposure to high-quality local news sources – outlets that devote significant attention to substantive issues – is an especially strong correlate of political ambition.

These findings have widespread implications. First, efforts to explain candidate emergence should incorporate people's news consumption habits. Individuals who may be qualified and well positioned to run for office may nonetheless never consider it if their news habits do not give them a reason to invest in politics in their local community. Moreover, the findings imply that the struggles of the local news industry and its shrinking audience may undermine political ambition in the United States. Not only may the increasingly anemic local news environment make it less likely that people will consider running for local office, but it may also leave the pool of candidates comprised of people whose primary goal has little to do with serving their local communities.

Who Runs for Office? Standard Accounts of the Candidate Emergence Process

From the time that Harold Lasswell (1948, 20) observed that “some personalities are power seekers, searching out the power institutions of the society . . . and devoting themselves to the capture and use of government,” political scientists have sought to understand why certain people pursue political power, whereas others have no interest whatsoever in running for office. Although the decision to enter the electoral arena is complex and multi-faceted, the literature coalesces behind two broad forces that shape political ambition: the political opportunity structure and political socialization.

Turning first to the political opportunity structure, many scholars approach the decision to run for office as primarily a strategic response to the external political environment (Schlesinger 1966). The paradigm assumes that when faced with a favorable political opportunity structure – for example, an open seat, a term limited incumbent, party congruence with constituents, or uncompetitive elections – a potential candidate will opt to enter a race (Black 1972; Eulau and Prewitt 1973; Goodliffe 2001; Kazee 1994; Maestas et al. 2006; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966; Stone and Maisel 2003). Aspiring candidates’ personal backgrounds and experiences are treated as exogenous. Rather, the “seats available and the hierarchy of positions for advancement give shape and definition to the political career” (Prinz 1993, 27).

Focusing on the political opportunity structure sheds light on whether potential candidates will choose to run for a particular office at a given time, seek higher office, or retire from politics altogether. The explanation is less suited, however, to explain the earlier stages of the candidate emergence process. After all, an important phase of the development of political ambition occurs well before the actual decision to enter a specific race ever transpires. If a potential candidate has never considered running for office at the abstract level, then he or she likely won’t be cognizant of

the opportunity structure, let alone respond strategically to it (see Fox and Lawless 2005; Lawless 2012).

The political socialization explanation addresses this concern. In this earlier stage of the candidate emergence process, potential candidates' politically relevant backgrounds, traits, and experiences determine whether the idea of running for office ever appears on their radar screen (Lawless and Fox 2025; 2010; 2005; see also Fishel 1971; Soule 1969; Barber 1965; Lasswell 1948). Potential candidates whose professional backgrounds place them in close proximity to the political arena, for example, are more likely to consider running for office. The same is true for potential candidates who grew up in politicized homes, were ever encouraged or recruited to run for office, or consider themselves qualified to be a candidate (see Gulzar 2021; Lawless 2012).

Much of the work in this vein addresses the gender gap in political ambition, or the way traditional gender socialization makes it less likely that women envision themselves as candidates (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2024; Fox and Lawless 2025; Karpowitz, Preece, and Monson 2017). But recent studies have also documented relationships between political ambition and occupational status (Carnes 2018; 2016; Carnes and Lupu 2025), partisan affiliation (Crowder-Meyer and Lauderdale 2014), personality traits in general (Clifford, Simas, and Kirkland 2021; Dynes et al. 2019; Hart et al. 2022), and attitudes toward competition in particular (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece 2015).

Together, the opportunity structure and socialization explanations take us a long way in predicting who considers running for office and who actually takes the plunge. Both explanations, however, share a common and significant omission: Neither accounts for the information environment potential candidates navigate. To be sure, the opportunity structure explanation acknowledges that political interest (as well as financial security and political experience) matters for candidate emergence. But for the most part, the paradigm takes ambition as “given.” Whether it’s

realized is a function of the opportunity structure. Similarly, socialization-based accounts of candidate emergence recognize that general political interest correlates with ambition. Potential candidates' specific news habits and the way they acquire political information, however, tend to be ignored.

The Overlooked Piece: Local News and Political Ambition

The lack of attention to information in the study of political ambition is puzzling because it's so central to explanations for political engagement. For decades, research has argued that people's likelihood of participating in the political process is connected to their access to information (Downs 1957; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). When information is limited, citizens find it difficult to distinguish between alternatives, leading the costs of participation to outweigh any perceived benefits (Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1996; Hayes and McKee 2009). As people are exposed to more information, their political knowledge increases, which facilitates participation (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Voter turnout, for instance, is higher in elections in which more information is available to citizens than in those where it's not (Aldrich 1993; Cox and Munger 1989; Gilliam 1985; Jackson 1993; Nicholson and Miller 1997). Similarly, people who are exposed to more news are more likely to engage in civic activities (Prior 2005; Putnam 2000; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Information can facilitate participation in multiple ways, but one important mechanism is by clarifying the stakes of politics. People who have more political information are more likely to see differences between parties and candidates and to understand the implications of political developments (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Converse 1964). They are also more likely to understand how politics affects them personally (Hutchings 2003). In general, information helps people connect remote political discussions and circumstances to their own lives and communities. That knowledge may then lead them to engage in political action.

This process is particularly important for political ambition. People often run for office because they are motivated to try to solve a problem in their community (Canon 1990; Costantini 1990; Fox 1997). But the problems that motivate people to run are not conjured out of thin air. Instead, citizens learn about them from exposure to information about social and political conditions. The role of information doesn't end there, however. If a potential candidate is to emerge, then he or she must also have a basic knowledge of the structure of government, the way current elected officials are addressing a problem (or not), and how serving in office would offer an opportunity to develop a new or better solution. Typically, people acquire both kinds of knowledge – what the salient problems are and how government is responding to them – through the news media (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972).

Because the entry point into public office tends to be at the local level, we argue that people's exposure to information about local conditions will spur political ambition. People who object to property tax increases, testing policies in public schools, or a lack of affordable housing – all local issues – may determine that they can best address their concerns by running for office. But they are unlikely to reach that conclusion absent information about how these issues affect their community. And for the vast majority of people, the way they learn about these issues is through local media – newspapers, television, radio, and other outlets (Hayes and Lawless 2021). Although national news may increase political engagement, it is unlikely to prompt people to consider a candidacy, particularly at the local level, because there is rarely a clear connection between national news coverage and the local context where almost all elective offices are situated. Nor does national news give people information about how particular problems are being addressed in their community.¹ A logical extension of this argument is that exposure to more substantive local news –

¹ To this point, concerns about specific issues seem to be especially good predictors of whether potential candidates launch a campaign. In a recent study, Green, Conroy, and Hammond (2024) show that aspiring candidates who

coverage that focuses primarily on government and public policy rather than lighter fare such as weather and sports – is especially likely to propel interest in running for office.

Although the literature has largely overlooked the relationship between news consumption and political ambition, two studies do suggest a connection. Both focus on the consequences of the decline of local newspapers in recent decades. Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido (2013) examine the effects of the 2007 closure of the *Cincinnati Post*, one of two major newspapers serving markets in southern Ohio and northern Kentucky. After the newspaper shut down, the number of candidates running for seats on local school boards, county councils, and city commissions declined for at least several years. Rubado and Jennings (2020) measure staffing levels at 11 California local newspapers and find that as the number of reporters and editors declined over a 20-year period, so too did the number of mayoral candidates in the communities served by those papers. These case studies suggest the plausibility of our argument, but we need a broader array of data to confirm the relationship between local news and political ambition, as well as to address competing explanations.

Data on Political Ambition and News Consumption

Studying the extent to which local news consumption shapes political ambition is straightforward, at least theoretically. Operationalizing the relationship, however, is more difficult. One likely reason research has largely ignored the connection is that surveys rarely include appropriate measures of both media habits and political ambition. Studies of candidate emergence typically contain gauges of political ambition but not detailed questions about people's media consumption, including attention to local news. And studies well-suited to characterize people's media habits rarely include questions about political ambition.

expressed concerns about a specific issue as a reason for running were more likely to launch a campaign than were people who said they were motivated by broader political trends, such as the election of Donald Trump.

To overcome these limitations, we included on six surveys questions that allow us to measure both interest in running for office and media habits, especially at the local level. We draw on data from two nationally representative surveys – a module from the 2017 Cooperative Election Study and an original poll conducted by SSRS during the 2024 presidential campaign; three statewide surveys (in Michigan, Montana, and New Hampshire) conducted in the spring and summer of 2024; and a 2021 – 2022 national sample of “potential candidates” (see Appendix A for a description of each survey and its sample size). Together, these data sets allow us to explore across a variety of contexts and populations the association between news habits and interest in running for office. If we find consistent patterns across the surveys, that will increase our confidence that the relationship we’re positing is robust.

At the same time, we should be circumspect about the causal inferences we can draw from these observational, cross-sectional data. One concern is that any relationship between local news consumption and political ambition may be spurious – some other factor, such as a general public spiritedness, may be driving both. In the analyses below, we seek to address this by controlling for numerous factors that might also account for the relationship. Nonetheless, future work that can provide stronger causal inferences would be welcome, a point we return to in the Conclusion.

Local News Consumers Express More Interest in Running for Office

We begin the analysis by turning to our two national surveys and three statewide surveys to describe the basic relationship between political ambition and local news habits. Each survey included a standard measure of political ambition in which we asked respondents whether they ever thought about running for office (e.g., Lawless and Fox 2025; see also Carnes 2018; Gulzar 2021). Respondents could report they had already run for elective office, had seriously considered it, that it had crossed their mind, or that they had not thought about it. Consistent with previous scholarship, we define people who fall into one of the first three categories as expressing political ambition. On

average, across the five surveys 17% reported that the idea of running for an elective position at least crossed their mind. This includes people who had seriously considered running (2.9%) or had already thrown their hats into the ring (2.1%).²

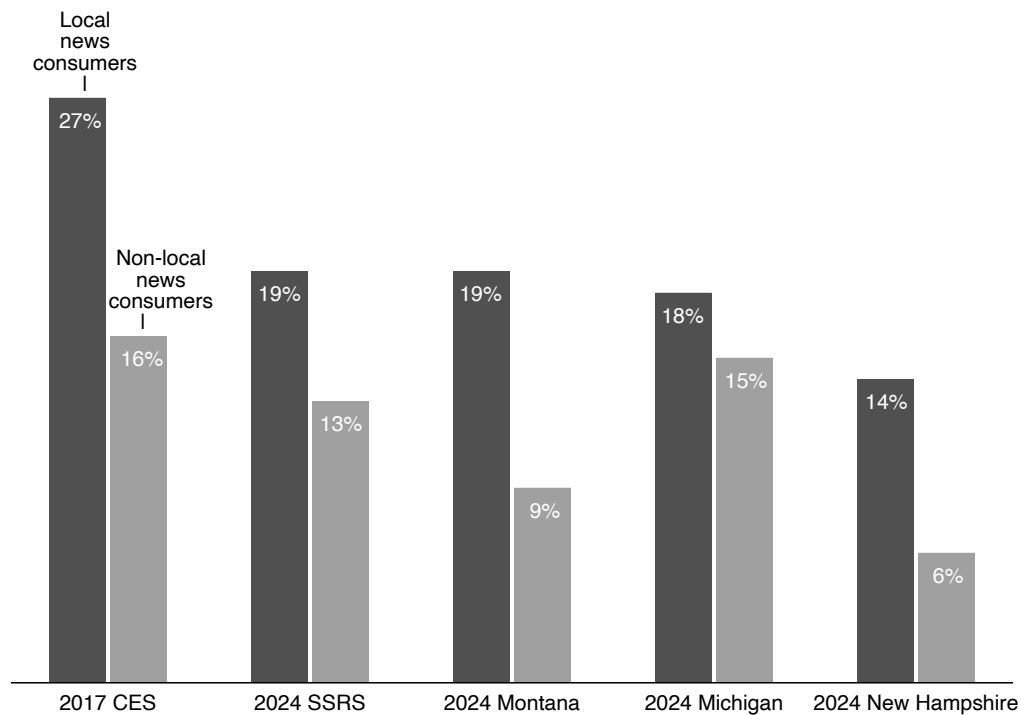
In each survey, we also asked respondents how they get news about local politics and their local community. We included questions about whether they read a local newspaper, watched local television news, listened to local radio, visited digital state and local outlets, and the like (see Appendix B for the battery of local news questions on each survey). Although the specific items differ somewhat in each survey, they all measure respondents' local news habits with an unusual level of detail. And the data reveal that a sizable share of people consumes local news. In the SSRS sample, for instance, nearly 60% of respondents reported having consumed some form of local news in the last 24 hours; two thirds reported consuming at least two sources of local news – newspaper, television, radio, or blog – “sometimes” or “often.” Among respondents in the national CES sample, 70% reported following local news “closely” or “very closely.”

Across all five surveys, respondents who consumed some form of local news – for instance, read a local newspaper or watched local TV news – were more likely to express interest in running for office than people who did not. Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents expressing interest in running for office in each survey, broken down by whether the respondents consumed local news. In the 2017 CES, for instance, 27% of people who consume local news said they had at least considered running, compared to 16% of non-local news consumers, a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$). The gap in the other four surveys ranges from 3 to 10 points.³

² Levels of political ambition varied across survey, but not dramatically. In the SSRS national survey, 17% of respondents considered running for office, including 1.5% who gave it serious thought and 1% who actually ran. Interest was slightly higher in the CES module, where 20% of respondents considered running, including 3% who gave it serious thought and 2% who actually ran. In the statewide surveys, interest in running ranged from 13% of respondents in New Hampshire to 17% in Montana to 18% in Michigan. The percentage of people who had seriously thought about running in the state surveys ranged from 1.5% (NH) to 4.3% (MT), and the percentage who actually ran ranged from 2.3% (MI) to 2.8% (MT).

³ The difference is significant ($p < .05$) in every case except the Michigan survey.

Figure 1. Interest in Running for Office, by Local News Consumption

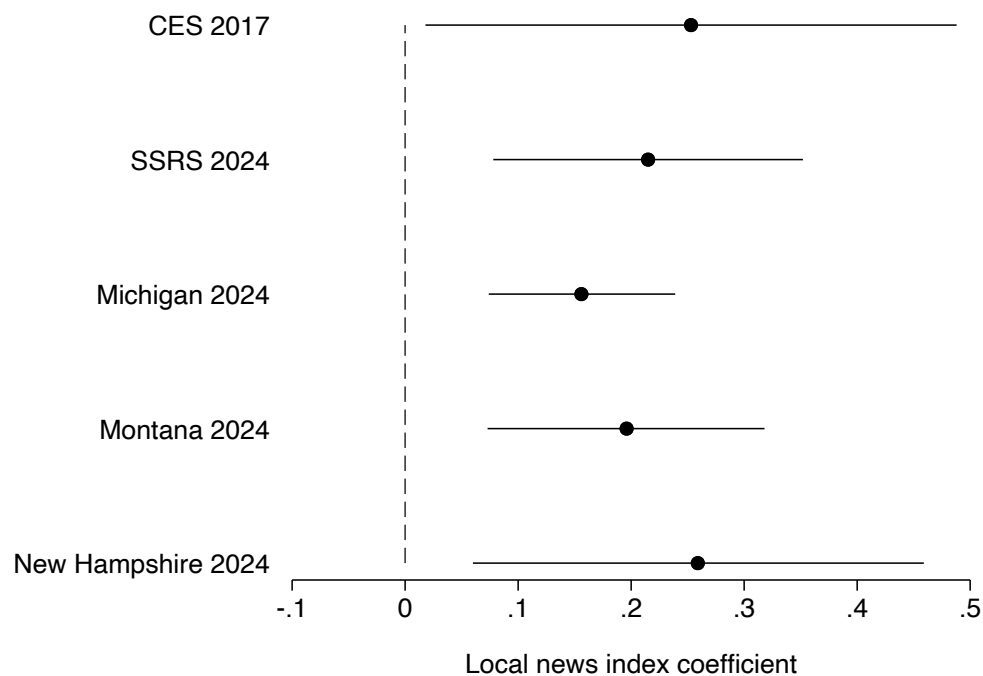


Notes: Bars represent the percentage of respondents who considered running for office (including those who had actually run for an elective position), broken down by whether they consumed at least one source of local news “often” or “sometimes” (for the statewide surveys and the 2024 national survey) or in the last 24 hours (for the 2017 national survey). See Appendix A for details on each sample and Appendix B for the local news items included in each survey. All comparisons are significant at $p < .05$ except Michigan.

Of course, such blunt comparisons are only suggestive. They do not account for other factors that might correlate with both local news consumption and political ambition or variation in how much local news respondents consume. To provide a more precise test, we modeled interest in running for office as a function of various demographic factors and partisanship as well as an index that captures variation in how much attention people pay to local news. The index is built from multiple items in each survey that asked respondents about the local outlets on which they rely. To create a roughly comparable measure across surveys, we summed up the number of local sources each respondent used. Higher scores indicate more local news consumption. See Appendix Table 1 for the full models.

Figure 2 presents coefficients (and 95% confidence intervals) for the local news index in each survey. In every case, an increase in local news consumption is associated with a statistically significant increase in the likelihood of expressing interest in running for office. In the 2017 CES, for example, a respondent who reported getting local news from two sources was 12 percentage points more likely to express interest in running than a respondent who did not consume local news. At the state level, the same shift in the Montana survey produced a 7-point increase in interest in running.⁴ Given that less than 20% of respondents said they ever considered running for office, this is a meaningful change.

Figure 2. The Relationship between Local News Consumption and Political Ambition



Notes: Point estimates represent coefficients from logistic regression models predicting whether a respondent expressed interest in running for office. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Full models appear in Appendix Table 1.

⁴ Because the local news index is different in each survey, we cannot compare these effects across surveys. It's not necessarily the case, for example, that the effect is smaller in Montana than in the CES. But it is the case that within each sample, more local news consumption is associated with higher levels of interest in running for office.

Local, Not National, News Consumption Predicts Political Ambition

Our theoretical argument is more nuanced, however. Whereas we expect local news consumption to encourage political ambition, we do not expect exposure to national news to systematically shape interest in running for office. National news rarely focuses on local political conditions, the performance of local elected officials, or the nuts and bolts required to get involved in politics – the type of information likely to facilitate ambition.

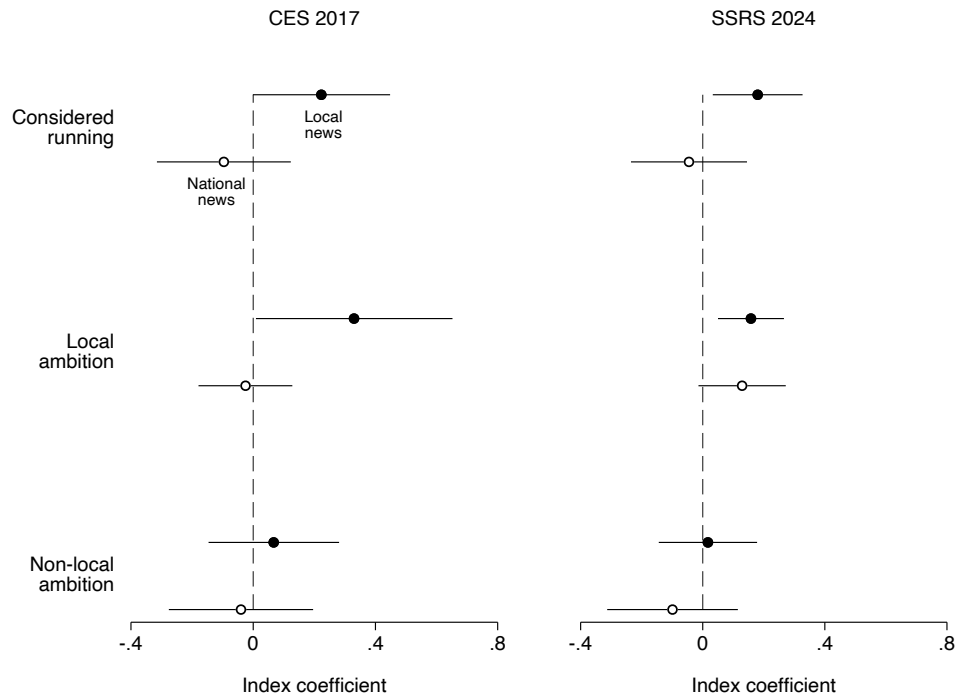
Our two national surveys allow us to test this argument because they include a battery of items about national news consumption; the statewide surveys did not. These surveys also include items that measure respondents' political engagement, which allows us to provide a stronger test of the argument that local news consumption exerts an independent effect on political ambition rather than simply serving as a proxy for political interest. Thus, we added to our original models an index of exposure to national news as well a measure of political engagement (see Appendix Table 2).

Figure 3 plots coefficients for both the local and national news index. The top row presents the results from models predicting whether a respondent has ever considered running for office. In both the CES and SSRS surveys, local news consumption is a significant predictor of ambition, and national news consumption is not. Moreover, a post-estimation Wald test reveals that in the CES survey, the local news coefficient is larger than the national news coefficient.⁵

We can also test an important implication of our argument by examining the level of office respondents are interested in seeking. If local news provides information about local issues, local elected officials, and the local political context, then it should spur interest in local positions, not higher-level offices. On both national surveys, we asked respondents, even if they've never thought about running for office, which offices they might ever be interested in in seeking (see Table 1).

⁵ For the CES, the p-value for a test of the difference between the local and national news coefficients is .07. For the SSRS survey, it is .24.

Figure 3. Local News, National News, and Political Ambition



Notes: Point estimates represent coefficients from logistic regression models predicting whether a respondent expressed interest in running for office, interest in running for local office, and interest in statewide or federal office. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Full models appear in Appendix Table 2.

As we'd expect, respondents are much more likely to express interest in running for local office than state or national positions.⁶ And the results presented in the middle row of Figure 3 show that in both surveys, interest in local office – school board, city council, or mayor – is a function of local news consumption. Exposure to local news is not, however, a predictor of non-local ambition (bottom row of the figure). Again, national news consumption fails to achieve statistical significance across the board.⁷

⁶ In the 2024 SSRS sample, for instance, 47% of respondents expressed interest in at least one local position, compared to just 12% who reported that they'd consider running for a statewide or federal position. The gap in the 2017 CES sample is similar; whereas 56% of respondents considered a local position, only 26% were open to a statewide or federal post.

⁷ In the CES, a Wald test shows the local news coefficient is a significantly stronger predictor of local ambition than the national news coefficient ($p < .05$). In the SSRS, the difference between the two is not significant. In the non-local ambition models, there are no differences between the two coefficients, suggesting that news habits are only weakly related to people's ambition for higher level offices.

Table 1. Elective Office Preferences

	2017 CES	2024 SSRS
Local Office		
School board	29 %	23 %
Town or city council	39	34
Mayor	10	10
State Office		
State legislator	15	11
Secretary of State	-	4
Governor	7	5
Federal Office		
U.S. House of Representatives	10	7
U.S. Senate	-	6
President	7	4
N	1,000	1,264

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of respondents who said they would consider running for the specified position. In the 2017 CES, the survey did not ask about the U.S. House and U.S. Senate separately, so the 10% entry reflects the percentage of respondents who expressed interest in running for at least one chamber of the U.S. Congress. Percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents often expressed interest in more than one position.

Of course, these results are based on many respondents who told us they had never actually considered running for office, so we should be cautious about what this means for candidate emergence. But the consistency of the relationship between local news consumption and expressions of interest in local office suggests that the type of news coverage people rely on shapes how they think about engaging with the political system.

Public Affairs-Focused Local News Especially Encourages Political Ambition

Not all local news is created equal. Some local outlets produce much more substantive coverage of public affairs than others (Dunaway and Graber 2022). And if political ambition arises from exposure to issue information, political controversies, and the machinations of local government, then interest in running for office should be highest among people who consume the most substantive local news. Typically, this would mean newspapers, which historically have been more likely than other outlets, such as local television, to cover local politics and government (e.g.,

Fowler 2018). But the rapid deterioration of the newspaper business means that even many daily newspapers no longer offer substantial local government coverage (Hayes and Lawless 2021).

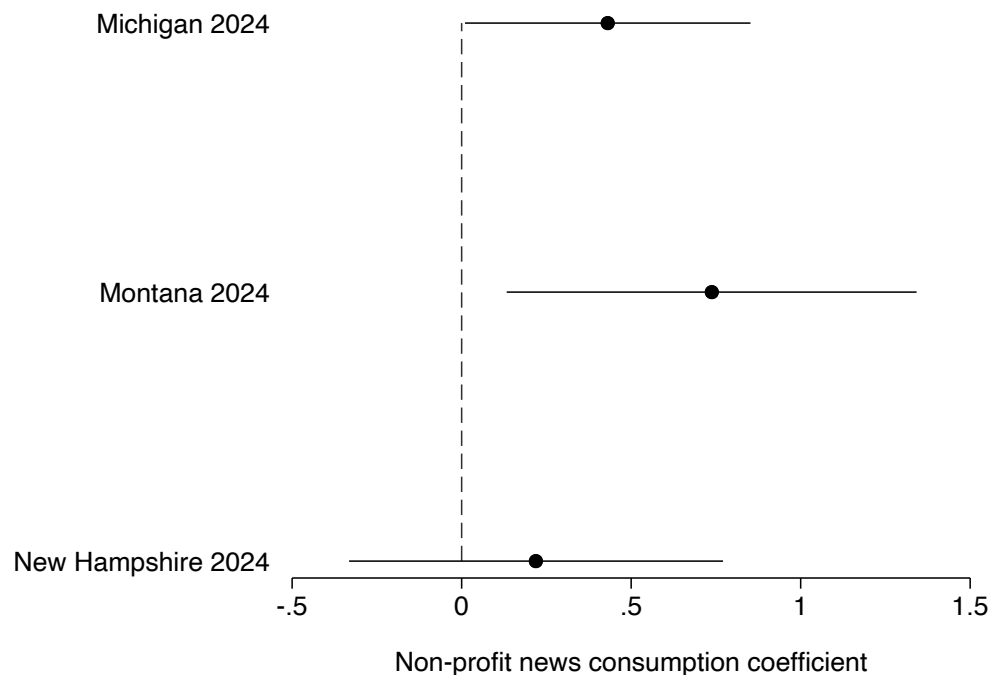
Consequently, we turn to non-profit local news sources – a growing category of outlets in the United States devoted to public affairs – to assess the relationship between political ambition and substantive local news consumption. Our three statewide surveys asked respondents whether they regularly got news from a major non-profit state and local news outlet; depending on the respondent’s state, the survey included a question about Bridge Michigan, Montana Free Press, or New Hampshire Public Radio. All three focus on state and local public affairs and should provide consumers with information that would encourage political ambition (see Hayes 2025).

To test whether consuming a more substantive news source matters for ambition, we once again performed logistic regression models predicting a respondent’s interest in running for office. But here, we disaggregated our local news measures and included an indicator for whether a respondent regularly accessed news from the state’s major local non-profit news source. Each model also controls for the demographic and political factors included in our previous models, as well as attention to other sources of state and local news.

Figure 4 presents the coefficients (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) for non-profit news consumption. The results are suggestive, although not uniform. In Michigan and Montana, respondents who regularly accessed news from the public affairs-focused non-profit in their state were significantly more likely to express political ambition than those who did not. In Michigan, for instance, regularly reading Bridge Michigan increased a respondent’s likelihood of considering a candidacy by 6 percentage points. This finding emerges even as the model controls for respondents’ use of other state and local media outlets, suggesting a distinct effect for local sources devoted specifically to covering government and politics.

In New Hampshire, on the other hand, regular consumers of New Hampshire Public Radio were not more likely than non-regular consumers to express interest in running for office. One reason may be that even as the radio station produces much public affairs reporting, it also offers more entertainment content than either Bridge Michigan or the Montana Free Press, perhaps reducing its impact as a source of substantive news. Nonetheless, the findings in Michigan and Montana are notable and provide at least tentative support for the connection between substantive political reporting and political ambition.

Figure 4. Non-Profit Local News Use and Political Ambition



Notes: Point estimates represent coefficients from logistic regression models predicting whether a respondent expressed interest in running for office. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Full models appear in Appendix Table 3.

The Link between Local News and Political Ambition Holds among Potential Candidates

The findings from two national and three statewide surveys support our theoretical argument: People who consume more local news are more likely to express interest in running for

office, particularly at the local level. That pattern may be strongest when consumers get news from outlets with substantive coverage of local politics. And national news does not have the same effect, likely because national news outlets don't help people connect their local concerns with a point of entry into politics. Despite our rather consistent findings across surveys, they are all based on samples of the general population. This means not only that most respondents have never considered running for office, but also that hardly any will actually ever emerge as candidates. As a final test of the argument, we turn to data collected from potential candidates – women and men whose backgrounds better approximate the pool of people who tend to run for office.

Our data come from the 2021 – 2022 wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Study, which includes surveys of more than 5,000 “potential candidates” (see Lawless and Fox 2025 and Appendix C for details on the sample). Roughly half of these people are lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists, the four leading professions that precede a state legislative or congressional candidacy. The other half are college-educated and work full-time, but not in one of the feeder professions; this background is common among local candidates. An advantage of these data is that respondents are very politically active – five times more likely than the general population to have volunteered on a campaign, four times more likely to have attended a political meeting, and more than twice as likely to have made a political donation.⁸ They're also much more likely to exhibit political ambition. Approximately 40% of respondents reported that the idea of running for an elective position at least “crossed my mind.” This includes people who have seriously considered running (7%) and those who have already run (6%). If the patterns we observed among general population samples hold here, then we can be more confident in the relationship between local news consumption and political ambition.

⁸ These comparisons are based on American National Election Studies data from 2020.

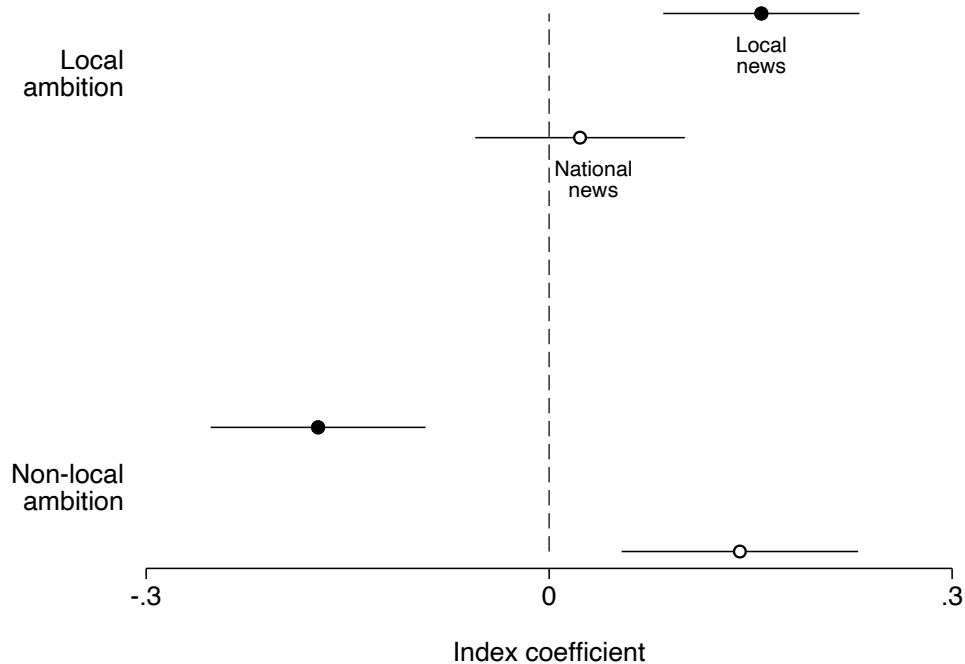
Figure 5 presents the results of logistic regression models predicting potential candidates' interest in running for local office as well as statewide or federal office (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals). The models are similar to our general population analyses, but also include measures of whether a respondent was ever recruited to run for office from a political actor, ever encouraged to run from a family member, colleague, or member of the clergy, and the extent to which he or she feels qualified to run. Each of these is a strong predictor of ambition (see Gulzar 2021; Lawless 2012; Lawless and Fox 2025). Appendix Table 4 presents models with and without these additional controls.

As in our general population analyses, potential candidates who consume more local news are more likely to express interest in running for local office (top row of the figure). We can put the magnitude of the finding into perspective in two ways. First, among the sample of potential candidates, 58% expressed interest in running for one of the local offices we asked about – school board, city council, or mayor.⁹ All else equal, a respondent who consumes two sources of local news is approximately 6 percentage points more likely to say she is interested in running for local office than someone who does not consume local news. Second, the local news effect is generally the same magnitude as that associated with a one-unit increase on a four-point qualifications measure (i.e., the difference between self-assessing as “qualified” versus “very qualified” to run for office). It's also comparable to the effect of two additional acts of political participation.

Just like our previous analyses, we observe a comparatively weak relationship between national news consumption and local ambition. National news consumption is not associated with interest in running for local office, and its coefficient is significantly smaller than the local news coefficient ($p < .05$).

⁹ As was the case in our earlier analyses, we include the full sample, not just people who have considered running for office.

Figure 5. Potential Candidates' Interest in Running for Local and Higher Offices



Notes: Point estimates represent coefficients from logistic regression models predicting whether a respondent expressed interest in running for local office and interest in statewide or federal office. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Results are from the fully specified models in Appendix Table 4.

The story is different for ambition for statewide or federal office. Unlike in our previous analyses, national news consumption is positive and significant, implying that attention to national politics does encourage interest in non-local offices. Local news consumption, however, is negative and significant. This suggests that national news may play a role in shaping ambition for higher-level office among potential candidates. But because even among this politically engaged sample almost three times as many respondents expressed interest in a local office than a non-local one (58% vs. 21%), local news habits are more relevant for explaining broader patterns of candidate emergence.

Conclusion

The political ambition literature has demonstrated that the political opportunity structure and the socialization process explain why people do or do not run for office. But we view the lack of

attention to how potential candidates acquire political information as a significant theoretical hole in this body of work. One reason for the omission is that the relationship between news habits and ambition might seem so intuitive that research isn't necessary: Consuming news makes people more politically aware, and that political awareness spurs their interest in running for office. We have shown, however, that mere news consumption is not what matters. Instead, for the most part, it is attention to local news that creates a foundation for political ambition. This is likely because local news coverage helps people identify community concerns that can be addressed by the offices where most opportunities for running arise – in local government.

Theoretically, our argument suggests that scholars should devote more attention to identifying the way that exposure to news and information shapes interest in entering electoral politics. After all, our evidence is observational and correlational, which suggests caution in drawing firm conclusions about the causal effects of local news. Research designs that allow for better causal inference would help identify the robustness of the relationship. One productive line of work could focus on the mechanisms by which local news encourages ambition. We have laid out an informational story – local news helps people connect important problems in their community to the actions that government officials are, or are not, taking to solve them. But local news might also spur political ambition by forging a psychological connection between local residents and their community. People who learn more about their cities and towns through news coverage might also develop a greater sense of local identity, which may translate into seeking local office. The fact that we find similar patterns across national surveys, state surveys, and among people well-positioned to run for office suggests that exposure to local news plays a significant role in determining the makeup of the hundreds of thousands of elected officials across the United States. More research on potential mechanisms could help explain how political ambition may change as people's news habits evolve.

Indeed, our findings suggest that the evolution of the media environment in the last three decades will have profound implications for who runs for office in the United States. Throughout the 20th century, most Americans got most of their news from local news sources. Even if they weren't especially interested in public affairs, regular local news consumption meant residents routinely learned about the most important problems in their community. But because of both declines in the supply of local news and consumer attention to it, Americans now get less information about local politics and government. Although levels of ambition haven't changed dramatically (Lawless and Fox 2025), interest in running for office at the local level may very well start to decline. In the coming years, younger generations, whose news habits are dominated by social media and who consume very little local news, will replace older cohorts. That will almost certainly lead to a pool of potential candidates whose connection to local news is more tenuous than that of previous generations.

At a minimum, the decline in local news consumption may change the kind of people who run for office. Individuals who were once motivated by an interest in fixing their communities may be more likely to pursue office for other reasons (or be replaced by people who are politically ambitious for other reasons). They may respond to levels of hyper-partisanship. They may be increasingly motivated by self-interest or financial gain. They may view running for office as a way to address national issues and debates. To the extent this occurs, it would be worrisome. It seems uncontroversial to assert that democracy is most likely to flourish when political leaders are motivated to improve the lives of the constituents they serve in the communities where they live. The disappearance of local news may reshape local politics and local politicians for generations.

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Appendix A. Summary of Datasets

Composition	Date	Source	Sample Size
Michigan state survey	April 24 – 20, 2024	Qualtrics	2,020
Montana state survey	May 8 – 16, 2024	Qualtrics	650
New Hampshire state survey	June 10 – 26, 2024	Qualtrics	655
CES national survey	October 2017	YouGov	1,000
SSRS national survey	October 12 – November 4, 2024	SSRS	1,264
Potential candidates survey	November 18, 2021 – March 22, 2022	YouGov	5,076

Notes: For the three statewide surveys, the samples were representative of each state's population on most dimensions, although they were somewhat older than the population of each state. To more precisely approximate each state's population, the data were weighted by U.S. Census estimates for state populations on age, gender, race, and education. All results in this paper are based on the analysis of the weighted data.

Appendix B. Local News Questions, by Survey

“How often would you say you get news and information from the following sources?”

Response categories: often, sometimes, rarely, never

Michigan survey

Local TV news
Local newspapers
Local radio stations
Statewide newspapers
Statewide radio stations
Bridge Michigan

Montana survey

Local TV news
Public radio
Montana Free Press
Daily Montanan
Billings Gazette
Bozeman Daily Chronicle
Missoulian
Flathead Beacon

New Hampshire survey

NH public radio
WMUR
NH Union Leader
NH Bulletin
Boston Globe

2024 SSRS

Local TV news station
Local daily newspaper
Local radio station
Local blog

In the past 24 hours, have you done any of the following? Check all that apply.

2017 CES

Read the print version of a local newspaper
Read the online version of a local newspaper
Read a blog about politics in your community
Read a blog about politics in your state

Potential candidates survey

Read the print version of a local newspaper
Read the online version of a local newspaper
Read a blog about politics in your community
Watched a local television news broadcast

Appendix C: Potential Candidates Data Collection

YouGov broke the potential candidates sample into two parts. First, they compiled a sample based on the four feeder professions to politics, which included surveys of 1,576 people who identified as lawyers, educators, or business professionals, as well as 500 politically active, college-educated women and men. The frame for the politically active sample was representative of respondents in the 2020 Cooperative Election Study who engaged in at least four of the following activities in the last year: (1) attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council); (2) put up a political sign (such as a lawn sign or bumper sticker); (3) worked for a candidate or campaign; (4) attended a political protest, march, or demonstration; (5) contacted a public official; and (6) donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on age, race, and education and evenly split on gender.

Then, YouGov supplemented the sample with surveys of 3,417 full-time employed, college-educated respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 3,000 to produce the final dataset. The frame for this sample was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

Appendix Table 1. The Relationship between Local News Consumption and Political Ambition

	National Surveys		State Surveys		
	2017 CES	2024 SSRS	Michigan	Montana	New Hampshire
Local news index	.253 * (.120)	.215 * (.070)	.156 * (.042)	.196 * (.062)	.259 * (.102)
College educated	.668 * (.307)	.342 (.178)	.142 (.172)	.238 (.282)	.534 (.301)
Income	.042 (.039)	.023 (.071)	.033 (.028)	.053 (.047)	.038 (.049)
Woman	-1.196 * (.254)	-1.103 * (.173)	-.953 * (.146)	-1.316 * (.240)	-.898 * (.261)
White	-.158 (.415)	-.013 (.200)	-.578 * (.177)	-.044 (.350)	-.336 (.533)
Age	-.001 (.006)	-.155 * (.050)	-.017 * (.005)	-.003 (.007)	-.002 (.007)
Democrat	.145 (.307)	.585 (.341)	.576 * (.240)	-.519 (.339)	.481 (.411)
Republican	.327 (.257)	.697 * (.343)	.766 * (.250)	-.476 (.328)	.788 (.411)
Constant	-1.549 * (.622)	-1.804 * (.425)	-1.108 * (.367)	-1.335 * (.601)	-3.250 * (.741)
Pseudo R ²	.090	.098	.083	.118	.084
N	832	1,232	2,008	641	654

Notes: Entries represent logistic regression coefficients (and standard errors) predicting whether a respondent ever considered running for office. * $p < .05$, one-tailed.

Appendix Table 2. Local News, National News, and Political Ambition

	2017 CES Survey			2024 SSRS Survey		
	Considered Running	Local Ambition	Statewide or Federal Ambition	Considered Running	Local Ambition	Statewide or Federal Ambition
Local news index	.223 * (.115)	.330 * (.164)	.067 (.110)	.180 * (.075)	.158 * (.055)	.017 (.082)
National news index	-.096 (.112)	-.025 (.079)	-.040 (.121)	-.045 (.097)	.129 (.073)	-.099 (.109)
College educated	.572 (.313)	.564 * (.194)	-.091 (.208)	.230 (.185)	.334 * (.137)	.364 (.206)
Income	.025 (.037)	.011 (.039)	.045 (.031)	.032 (.073)	.085 (.053)	-.145 (.082)
Woman	-1.098 * (.290)	.100 (.217)	-1.034 * (.233)	-1.123 * (.179)	-.640 * (.124)	-.969 * (.197)
White	-.317 (.395)	-.176 (.223)	-.151 (.257)	-.101 (.207)	-.064 (.151)	-.617 * (.214)
Age	-.007 (.006)	-.004 (.007)	-.031 * (.005)	-.167 * (.053)	-.228 * (.040)	-.173 * (.058)
Democrat	.007 (.328)	.275 (.289)	.469 (.346)	.289 (.351)	.682 * (.232)	.358 (.383)
Republican	.109 (.282)	.415 (.299)	.120 (.330)	.545 (.348)	.885 * (.233)	.701 (.383)
Interest/Participation	.862 * (.190)	.155 * (.154)	.623 * (.167)	.479 * (.068)	.268 * (.057)	.365 * (.074)
Constant	-3.720 * (.751)	-.959 * (.598)	-1.604 * (.611)	-1.841 * (.434)	-.581 (.303)	-1.089 * (.454)
Pseudo R ²	.130	.040	.121	.164	.143	.117
N	803	803	803	1,232	1,232	1,232

Notes: Entries represent logistic regression coefficients (and standard errors) predicting whether a respondent ever considered running for office, expressed interest in local office (school board, mayor, or city/town council), or expressed interested in federal or statewide office (U.S. House, U.S. Senate, president, governor, other statewide position). * p < .05.

Appendix Table 3. Non-Profit Local News Use and Political Ambition

	Michigan	Montana	New Hampshire
Non-profit local news use	.431 * (.215)	.738 * (.301)	.219 (.281)
Local news index	.100 * (.048)	-.090 (.086)	.271 * (.130)
College educated	.144 (.173)	-.239 (.284)	.537 (.302)
Income	.035 (.028)	.053 (.048)	.038 (.049)
Woman	-.941 * (.146)	-1.300 * (.241)	-.899 * (.262)
White	-.561 * (.177)	.056 (.354)	.341 (.533)
Age	-.016 * (.005)	-.004 (.007)	-.002 (.007)
Democrat	.577 * (.239)	-.514 (.345)	.482 (.410)
Republican	.775 * (.249)	.427 (.337)	.785 (.412)
Constant	-1.143 * (.367)	-1.245 * (.606)	-3.250 * (.741)
Pseudo R ²	.080	.116	.077
N	2,008	641	655

Notes: Entries represent logistic regression coefficients (and standard errors) predicting whether a respondent ever considered running for office. As in Tables 1 and 2, the local news index sums the number of local outlets from which respondents got news, but does not include use of the non-profit outlet.* $p < .05$.

Appendix Table 4. Potential Candidates' Interest in Running for Local and Higher Offices

	Local Office		Federal or Statewide Office	
Local news index	.203 *	.158 *	-.114 *	-.172 *
	(.035)	(.037)	(.040)	(.041)
National news index	.067	.023	.160 *	.142 *
	(.038)	(.040)	(.045)	(.045)
Woman	-.222 *	-.031	-.702 *	-.569 *
	(.065)	(.069)	(.078)	(.080)
Education	.188 *	-.020	.156 *	-.009
	(.066)	(.070)	(.078)	(.081)
Income	-.022	-.039 *	.034 *	.024
	(.012)	(.013)	(.014)	(.014)
Black	.211 *	.154	.393 *	.335 *
	(.104)	(.108)	(.117)	(.120)
Latino	.107	.025	.174	.106
	(.101)	(.106)	(.116)	(.119)
Married	.043	.008	-.234 *	-.255 *
	(.076)	(.079)	(.090)	(.092)
Children under 18 at home	.145	.106	.013	-.047
	(.075)	(.078)	(.087)	(.089)
Birth year	.017 *	.020 *	.023 *	.025 *
	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)
Democrat	.049	.127	.009	.065
	(.095)	(.098)	(.114)	(.116)
Republican	.033	-.001	.085	.037
	(.103)	(.107)	(.123)	(.126)
Political efficacy	.133 *	.067 *	.178 *	.124 *
	(.029)	(.031)	(.034)	(.035)
Political participation	.354 *	.236 *	.215 *	.097 *
	(.021)	(.023)	(.022)	(.024)
Self-assessed qualifications		.408 *		.293 *
		(.037)		(.043)
Recruited by political actor		-.086		.306 *
		(.107)		(.101)
Encouraged by personal source		.810 *		.532 *
		(.081)		(.187)
Constant	-35.362 *	-40.776 *	-47.283 *	-51.542 *
	(5.359)	(5.644)	(6.293)	(6.494)
Pseudo-R ²	.156	.232	.097	.139
N	4,655	4,652	4,655	4,652

Notes: Entries represent logistic regression coefficients (and standard errors) predicting whether a respondent expressed interest in running for local or statewide or federal office. * p < .05.

