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# Gaining and Losing Interest in Running for Public Office: The Concept of Dynamic Political Ambition

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*Considering a candidacy for public office involves pondering the courageous step of going before an electorate and facing potential examination, scrutiny, and rejection. Anyone who contemplates running for office, therefore, must answer a series of questions. Is the time right to inject my family into the political arena? Where am I in terms of my professional goals? Do I know enough about the issues and the political system to run for office? Am I in sync with my potential constituents on the issues that matter most? Have electoral gatekeepers indicated support for my foray into politics? Do I really want to take part in a political process that is so often associated with self-interest, corruption, and cynicism? In short, a variety of personal, professional, and political circumstances—circumstances that often change over time—undoubtedly affect the extent to which someone considers entering the electoral arena.*

Despite the intuitive appeal of thinking about political ambition as a trait that fluctuates, more than 60 years of research pertaining to the candidate emergence process treats political ambition as relatively static. Most political scientists work from a rational choice paradigm that conceptualizes political ambition as primarily a strategic response to a political opportunity structure (e.g., Kazee 1994; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966; Stone and Maisel 2003). Fluctuations in political ambition tend to be divorced from changes in circumstances at the individual level; rather, changes in the political opportunity structure account for shifts in candidate emergence. Even those scholars who focus on the manner in which individual characteristics do affect the decision to run for office tend to concentrate on fairly static demographic factors and personal traits (e.g., Fox and Lawless 2005; Fulton et al. 2006; Maestas et al. 2006). Moreover, they rely on cross-sectional data at one snapshot in time. Existing research on candidate emergence, therefore, does not focus on, operationalize, or provide a systematic understanding of, the process by which an individual gains or loses political ambition over the course of a lifetime.

Yet studying changes in individuals' political ambition is of central importance for several reasons. Foremost, examining individual-level change in political ambition is important because it offers an

opportunity to assess the extent to which the political climate affects civic engagement at the most profound levels. It is well-established in the literature on political participation and attitude formation that presidential scandals, tumultuous social, economic, and political times, and reactions to political leaders directly influence citizens' trust in and cynicism toward government (e.g., Cook and Gronke 2005; Hetherington 2005). In turn, levels of political trust and efficacy affect individuals' willingness to engage in political and community activities (e.g., Cohen and Dawson 1993; Piven and Cloward 1997). Even though running for office is, in many ways, the ultimate act of political participation, the concepts of political trust, cynicism, and efficacy are absent from the scholarship that addresses candidate emergence. Identifying and analyzing individual-level shifts in political ambition, therefore, allow for a critical exploration of whether political trends, events, and conditions affect potential candidates' attitudes and either inspire them to run for office or lead them to recoil at the notion.

Studying the degree to which political ambition ebbs and flows at the individual-level also provides insight into policymaking and representation at all levels of government. In most cases, the initial decision to run for office occurs at the local level; politicians often then opt to run for higher office (Black 1972;

Kazee 1994; Prinz 1993; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966). Thus, the manner in which that initial ambition evolves sets the stage for climbing the political ladder and the quality of representation a public official provides. State legislators with ambition to seek higher office, for example, are more likely to monitor constituents' opinions than are those with no interest in one day running for higher office (Maestas 2003). Moreover, highly professionalized state legislatures tend to be more representative of statewide policy preferences than are their nonprofessional counterparts (Maestas 2000). Establishing a better understanding of policymaking at all levels, as well as the extent to which policy makers will substantively represent their constituents, requires that we examine the initial decision to run for office and how that ambition emerges, sustains itself, or dissipates.

Finally, examining changes in ambition is important because it speaks to fundamental concerns regarding electoral competition. With roughly 500,000 elected positions in the United States, democracy cannot function as intended if competent, politically interested citizens do not exhibit a sincere, sustained interest in running for office and a willingness to present a battle of ideas to the voters. Research at the federal, state, and local level, however, reveals relatively limited electoral competition (Lawless and Pearson 2008; Schleicher 2007; Squire 2000). Without an understanding of the factors that trigger and suppress interest in running for office, we cannot fully gauge prospects for political accountability.

In this article, we propose the concept of *dynamic ambition*, the notion that myriad factors work systematically to encourage and suppress political ambition among potential candidates. We base our results on the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, our national panel of nearly 2,000 "eligible candidates" in both 2001 and 2008. This panel study allows for the first empirical assessment of the manner in which individual-level political attitudes and life experiences affect potential candidates' interest in running for office over time. The results reveal that political ambition fluctuates widely; we uncover significant individual-level shifts in interest in running for office over the course of seven years. These fluctuations tend not to result from changes in traditional gauges of political participation and activism. Rather, shifts in levels of external and internal political efficacy account for much of the variation in political ambition. Changes in patterns of political recruitment, as well as in personal and professional circumstances, also contribute to the likelihood that potential candidates will gain or lose interest in

seeking elective office. These findings suggest that political ambition is a volatile commodity and that a complete understanding of candidate emergence must incorporate its dynamic nature.

## Dynamic Ambition: Background and Hypotheses

The study of political ambition, which has been a mainstay in political science research for decades, tends to coalesce around the central premise that political ambition, itself, is a fixed attribute or "inherent characteristic" (Maestas et al. 2006, 195; see also Prinz 1993). From the time when Schlesinger (1966) released *Ambition and Politics*, scholars have employed a rational choice paradigm to understand the decision to run for office. Research in this vein argues that potential candidates are more likely to seek office when they face favorable political and structural circumstances. The number of open seats, term limits, levels of legislative professionalization, partisan composition of the constituency, and party congruence with constituents are among the factors individuals consider when seeking any elective position or deciding whether to run for higher office (Kazee 1994; Rohde 1979; Black 1972; Schlesinger 1966; Stone and Maisel 2003). In other words, open seats and a balancing of the political risks and rewards associated with pursuing a particular office comprise an individual's decision-making calculus.

The political opportunity structure framework for understanding political ambition provides substantial leverage in predicting whether an individual will choose to enter a specific political contest, seek higher office, or retire from politics altogether. But scholars have begun to demonstrate that a more complete understanding of candidate emergence demands expanding this paradigm in fundamental ways.

First, many political scientists—even some who work within the rational choice tradition—posit that the decision to run for office relies on a comprehensive set of considerations beyond a strict political opportunity structure. Rohde's (1979) path-breaking work on progressive ambition, for example, was among the first to acknowledge that elected officials assess the risks and value the rewards involved in seeking higher office differently, even when they face the same political context. More recently, Maestas et al. (2006) provide convincing empirical evidence that when state legislators consider running for the U.S. House of Representatives, they employ a calculus that

includes not only evaluating the political opportunity structure, but also a series of personal and institutional factors. And Fulton et al.'s (2006) examination of state legislators' decisions to seek higher office finds that a straight opportunity structure approach overlooks the manner in which gender systematically intersects with progressive ambition. Political ambition, therefore, is driven by more than the opportunity structure an individual faces.

Second, the political opportunity structure approach to studying ambition tends to overlook the early stages of the candidate emergence process. Building on Lasswell's (1948) notion of a "political type," we argue in earlier work that, in order to understand fully the decision dynamics involved in moving from "potential candidate" to "actual office holder," it is necessary to assess nascent ambition—or general interest in considering a candidacy (Fox and Lawless 2005; see also Barber 1965). This distinct phase of the development of political ambition occurs before the actual decision to enter a specific race ever transpires. After all, if the idea of running for office never really occurs to an individual, then he/she will never be in a position to assess a specific political opportunity structure or identify the level of office in which he/she is most interested. Notably, we find that nascent ambition is influenced by factors such as a politicized upbringing, race, and sex, each of which falls outside of the political opportunity structure on which most political ambition theory relies.

In continuing to develop and strengthen our understanding of candidate emergence, we argue that it is vital also to consider and incorporate explicitly the concept of *dynamic ambition*—the process by which an individual gains or loses political ambition over time. Certainly, aspects of the political opportunity structure can change, so implicitly, the rational choice paradigm allows for the possibility that someone might choose not to run for office at a particular time, but then opt to enter the electoral arena at another. Here, though, the individual's ambition does not change; rather, the political opportunity structure changes. Yet, regardless of the political opportunity structure a potential candidate might face, not everyone who considers running for office maintains that level of political ambition over a lifetime. Alternatively, individuals lacking the socio-demographic profile of a typical candidate can often be motivated to consider running for office by a change in circumstances.

The existing empirical work that examines individuals' traits and characteristics as predictors of political ambition, however, does not track systematic change in

interest in pursuing a candidacy. The early literature, for example, focuses on individuals who already hold elected office, so these analyses are confined to politicians at a time in their lives following the formation and crystallization of political ambition. Women and men who may have held some level of interest in running for office, but who then lost it or never exercised it, fall out of the analyses. Later studies—even those that focus on potential candidates—rely universally on data that gauge political ambition only at a single point in time. As Gaddie (2004) suggests, however, personal and political attitudes and events can constrain or promote political ambition through the life cycle. Thus, accounting for individual-level gains and losses in interest in running for office is a necessary condition for determining the circumstances under which potential candidates will ultimately emerge, but one that is absent from the political ambition scholarship.

Drawing on theory and empirical evidence from the literatures on political ambition and political participation at the mass level, we derive five expectations about the dynamic nature of the candidate emergence process. Our central and most important expectation—which deals with potential candidates' external and internal political efficacy—represents an improvement over the traditional, rationalist models of ambition and provides an opportunity to test the manner in which changes in attitudinal indicators associated with mass-level participation influence the evolution of political ambition. Our remaining four expectations involve more well-established predictors of candidate emergence. But even here, we build substantially on the scholarship by testing hypotheses about the relationship between *changes* in these indicators and changes in interest in running for office. The evolution of political ambition at the individual level is an intricate phenomenon and many of the expectations we identify are linked to one another. We do anticipate, though, that changes in each will exert an independent effect on a citizen's likelihood of gaining or losing interest in entering the electoral arena.

*Changes in Political Efficacy.* Public opinion scholars have documented declining levels of political trust and increasing cynicism toward government for the last 40 years (see Clawson and Oxley 2008). Much of this research links distrust of government to monumental events, such as the Vietnam War and the riots and demonstrations accompanying the Civil Rights Movement (Hetherington 2005). Less dramatic and shorter-term political and economic circumstances, however, can also fuel fluctuations in political trust (Cook and Gronke 2005), as can presidential behavior and approval ratings (Keele

2007). Regardless of the causes of fluctuating cynicism and trust, most political scientists agree that levels of external political efficacy—the degree to which one perceives that political institutions and public officials are responsive to citizens' preferences—carry consequences for political behavior. Citizens are more likely to engage the political system when they trust government and view it as responsive (Conway 1991; King 1997; Piven and Cloward 1997). Cynicism, on the other hand, leads to lower levels of political and community engagement (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Hirlinger 1992; Wilson 1991).

Although efficacy and cynicism have long been key predictors of political participation and engagement, scholars who focus on political ambition and candidate emergence tend to overlook their potential influence. Running for office, however, is arguably the highest form of political participation. There is reason to believe, therefore, that cynicism plays an important role in shaping political ambition. Over the course of the seven years between the two waves of this study, for example, potential candidates may have felt dismay over the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, the failed government response to Hurricane Katrina, and the polarized, gridlocked government. These events likely account for the record low presidential and congressional approval ratings documented by national pollsters at the time of the second wave of this study (Hunter 2008; Rasmussen 2008), as well shape attitudes toward state and local governments (Gartner and Segura 2008; Maestas et al. 2008). Hence, we expect to uncover an inverse relationship between political cynicism and political ambition; heightened levels of cynicism between 2001 and 2008 will depress a potential candidate's likelihood of considering a candidacy.

Similar to the way that changing perceptions of government and the political climate might affect levels of political ambition, so might changes in individuals' internal estimates of their personal attributes and feelings of efficacy as political candidates. Indeed, a well-established literature on political ambition recognizes that actual candidates and office holders recount the manner in which relatively short-term perceptions that are linked to the external political environment factor into the strategic calculus they employed when they decided to run for office. Perceptions of electoral success, for instance, affect whether an individual decides to enter his/her first congressional race (Maisel and Stone 1997).

At the precandidacy stage of the candidate emergence process, it is likely that the relevant perceptions to consider are longer term and linked to a potential candidate's internal psyche. Potential

candidates' estimates of their feelings of efficacy are likely based on a relatively broad set of criteria, including whether they think they have sufficient knowledge, confidence, and skills to enter the political sphere. This general sense of efficacy as a candidate, which we can tap into by measuring the degree to which an individual considers himself/herself "qualified" to run for office, precedes the stage at which potential candidates face a political opportunity structure and employ more traditional strategic calculations. Thus, we expect that changes in potential candidates' perceptions of how qualified they feel they are to run for office will account for gains and losses in political ambition. And whereas there are reasons to believe that individuals' external efficacy may have decreased between the two waves of the study, it is likely that their internal efficacy as candidates increased. After all, as individuals age and hone their professional skills, they acquire more experiences that qualify them to enter politics.

*Changes in Political Recruitment.* Party organizations' leaders, elected officials, and activists serve as gatekeepers who groom eligible candidates to run for office. For many individuals, recruitment from political leaders serves as the key ingredient in fomenting their thoughts of running. Not only is political viability often conveyed by the suggestion to run from a party official, but party support also tends to bring the promise of an organization that will work on behalf of a candidate. Indeed, we find that men and women who received encouragement to run for office from political actors are significantly more likely than those who received no such support to think seriously about a candidacy (Lawless and Fox 2010). Encouragement from political elites is instrumental in propelling a candidacy across political parties and contexts, but contemporary dynamics often drive patterns of political recruitment. In 2006, for instance, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, amidst an unpopular war and in an attempt to refute the notion that Democrats were "soft" on national security, successfully recruited several Iraq war veterans to enter congressional races (Bendavid 2007). Hence, because political recruitment can exert an immediate effect, we expect potential candidates who received recent encouragement from a gatekeeper to run for office to be more likely to exhibit an increase in political ambition.

*Changes in the Life Cycle.* Broad examinations of political participation suggest that age, marital status, and parental status positively affect levels of political participation at the mass level (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Over the course of the last decade, researchers have also provided evidence that these

factors affect political ambition. Younger potential candidates often have more energy to enter politics, endure the rigors of a campaign, and engage in the activities necessary for networking and fundraising (Gaddie 2004; see also Fowler and McClure 1989). On the other hand, younger men and women often also mention the trials and tribulations of maintaining the “balancing act” involved in reconciling a career and family (Gaddie 2004; see also Fulton et al. 2006). Although little empirical evidence offers direction in terms of the degree to which family structures and placement in the life cycle affect potential candidates’ choices, we anticipate that dramatic life changes—such as marriage, divorce, becoming a parent, having children move out, enduring health-related hardships within the family, or retiring—will account for some of the variation in a potential candidate’s ambition over time.

*Changes in Professional Status.* Certain professions—most notably law and business—serve as gateways to politics (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001). This relationship is straightforward; individuals who select high prestige occupations and seek to rise to the top of their professions may be more likely to think about acquiring positions of political power (Hain and Pierson 1975). Income level—a key indicator of professional success—is a significant predictor of mass level political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and interest in running for high-level office (Fox and Lawless 2005). Because clear indications of ambitious behavior in realms outside of politics can predict who considers running for office, we expect changes in career status to affect changes in interest in office seeking. Individuals who exhibit increasing levels of career ambition (taking on more responsibilities at work, receiving a boost in income) may also be increasingly interested in considering a future run for office.<sup>1</sup>

*Changes in Predictors of Political Engagement.* Similar to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) “resource-based” model of political participation, we expect that time, money, and civic skills affect interest in running for office. Changes in family and career responsibilities over time gauge changes in these key “resources.” But another set of resources for predicting political ambition centers around other types of political participation. Political activity—such as voting, contributing money to campaigns, and joining

political organizations—acts as a statistically significant predictor of political ambition among potential candidates (Lawless and Fox 2010). Issue passion, increasing partisanship, and ideological motivations can also spur political activism (Craig and O’Brien 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and ambition (Canon 1990). Hence, we expect that changes in political ideology, involvement, and interest may account for changes in levels of political ambition.

Together, our five research expectations allow us to examine the manner in which changes in political efficacy, recruitment, life circumstances, professional status, and political engagement drive dynamic ambition. Notably, because we focus on political ambition at the nascent stage, we do not expect gauges of the political opportunity structure to affect gains and losses in interest running for office (see Fox and Lawless 2005). The dynamic component of the candidate emergence process on which we focus precedes the decision to enter a particular race at a particular time. We do, however, err on the side of caution and control for the measurable structural changes in the electoral environment that the respondent may have experienced between the two waves of the study: changes in a state’s Democratic presidential vote share, as well as whether a potential candidate moved, became more ideologically congruent with the area in which he/she resides, or saw an increase in the number of open seats.

## The Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study

In order to study the early stages of political ambition and the manner in which it changes over time, we conducted the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study. This national panel—the first wave of which we conducted in 2001 and the second wave of which we completed in 2008—represents a methodological breakthrough because it allows for an examination of changes in political ambition at the individual level. It also serves as the only dataset of potential candidates for all levels of office. Aside from a study focusing on potential candidates for Congress, only some of whom have not previously held office (Stone and Maisel 2003), the datasets on which the literature on candidate emergence is based include actual candidates and office holders, all of whom, by definition, exhibited political ambition when they entered their first political contest (e.g., Gaddie 2004; Canon 1993; Maestas et al. 2006; Squire 1988).

<sup>1</sup>Although we expect citizens with high levels of career ambition and income to be more inclined to *consider* entering the political arena, we acknowledge that they may be less likely actually to launch a candidacy because the financial trade-offs involved in running for office are too onerous.

The Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study relies on a sample of well-credentialed respondents who are positioned to serve as future candidates for elective office. We drew the 2001 “candidate eligibility pool” from the professions that yield the highest proportion of political candidates for federal and state legislative positions: law, business, education, and politics (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001). More than 3,700 respondents completed the 2001 survey. The 2,036 respondents who completed the 2008 survey are a representative sub-sample of the original eligibility pool. Controlling for sex, race, and profession, individuals who expressed political ambition in 2001 were no more likely than respondents who had never considered a candidacy to complete the 2008 survey. Similarly, potential candidates who reported high levels of political interest, activism, or recruitment at the time of the 2001 survey were no more likely than those who did not to respond to the questionnaire (regression results not shown). Moreover, no significant demographic or professional factors distinguish the 2001 and 2008 samples. In terms of sex, race, level of education, household income, and age, the respondents who completed the second survey are a representative subset of the original respondents (see Table 1). They were slightly more liberal and Democratic in 2001 than was the overall sample, but these differences are minor (see Lawless and Fox 2010 for a full description of the research design and sample).<sup>2</sup>

The empirical analyses presented in this article are based on 1,810 of the 2,036 panel participants. As is often the case with survey research, not all respondents answer every survey question. Missing data are compounded in panel studies because responses to key questions are needed at multiple points in time. Thus, although 2,036 people returned both the 2001 and 2008 surveys with at least some usable responses, only 1,853 answered both the 2001 and 2008 survey questions that measured their interest in running for office at some point in the future. Forty-three of these respondents did not answer at least one static demographic variable question at both points in time, which we utilized as a check to confirm the respondent’s identity. The data indicate, however, that the 1,810 respondents on

whom we base our analyses are representative of the original 2001 candidate eligibility pool.

The panel data provide key advantages in assessing the extent to which political ambition is dynamic. Similar to the manner in which panel data play a critical role in identifying and explaining changes in partisanship (Carsey and Layman 2006; Goren 2005) and political participation (Stoker and Jennings 1995), this panel uniquely situates us to document empirically the extent to which political ambition changes over time, as well as shed light on what affects its evolution. After all, cross-sectional data allow researchers to estimate only how particular circumstances and variables affect an individual’s political ambition at one point in time. Panel data, which rely on individual outcomes at multiple points in time, allow for an examination of the factors that affect the propensity to gain or lose political ambition. Moreover, in addition to generating more accurate predictions with more efficient estimators and fewer multicollinearity problems, panel data also mitigate omitted variable biases (see Hsiao 2007).

## Dynamic Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool

We begin our investigation with an examination of the degree to which potential candidates’ interest in office holding has changed over time. In both waves of the study, we asked members of the sample—directly—whether they had any interest in running for office at some point in the future. The data presented in the top half of Table 2 indicate that, in 2008, nearly 70% of respondents had at least some interest in the idea of a future candidacy. Indeed, nearly one in five potential candidates expressed relatively strong interest in running for office; and half of the respondents were at least open to the idea. At the aggregate level, interest in running for office in 2008 was similar to interest in 2001.

We also uncover few differences in the offices in which potential candidates expressed interest. In both waves of the panel, we asked respondents what level(s) of office they might be interested in seeking if they were to enter a political contest. At both points in time, the respondents were aware of career ladder politics, with three out of five expressing interest in a local office—school board, city council, or mayor. Interest in running for state-level and federal office was less common, although still prevalent.

More important for our purposes, however, is the high degree of individual-level fluctuation in political

<sup>2</sup>The data presented in columns 3 and 4, however, highlight that the profile of the eligibility pool has changed over the course of the seven years between the two waves of the panel. Household incomes, overall, increased. In addition, a significant portion of respondents increased their identification with the Democratic party. Considering that political ideology has remained fairly constant, the shift in party identification likely reflects disillusionment with the Republican party’s face and name, not its ideology.

TABLE 1 Sample Demographics: A Comparison of Wave 1 and Wave 2 Respondents

	Wave 1 Respondents (in 2001)	Wave 2 Respondents (in 2001)	Wave 2 Respondents (in 2008)	Wave 2 Respondents Included in Regression (in 2008)
<b>Party Affiliation</b>				
Democrat	46%	49%	60%	60%
Republican	30	28	32	31
Independent	21	21	8	8
<b>Political Ideology</b>				
Liberal	28*	32	36	37
Moderate	52*	50	44	44
Conservative	20	18	20	19
<b>Sex</b>				
Men	53	54	54	54
Women	47	46	46	46
<b>Race</b>				
White	83	84	84	84
Black	10	9	9	8
Latino / Hispanic	5	5	5	5
Other	3	2	2	2
<b>Highest Level of Education</b>				
No College Degree	7	6	6	6
Bachelor's Degree	21	17	17	16
Graduate Degree	72	78	78	78
<b>Household Income</b>				
Less than \$50,000	9	10	4	5
\$50,001 - \$75,000	12	12	8	9
\$75,001 - \$100,000	18	17	13	13
\$100,001 - \$200,000	34	34	34	34
More than \$200,000	27	29	40	41
<b>Mean Age (Years)</b>	48	48	54	54
<b>Sample Size</b>	3,568	2,034	2,034	1,810

Note: In 2001, a 3-point scale measured party identification; in 2008, a 7-point scale was used. Included in the 2008 partisan categories are "Independent Leanners," who comprise 17% of "Democrats" and 11% of "Republicans."

ambition across the seven-year interval between the two waves of the panel. Although aggregate levels of future interest in office-seeking are similar across the two waves of the panel, the data highlight the dynamic nature of potential candidates' general levels of interest in running for office. Almost 40% of the 1,810 respondents who answered the question about interest in running for office both in 2001 and 2008 moved along the ambition continuum, with potential candidates more likely to lose political ambition than to gain it.<sup>3</sup> Further, shifts in political ambition were not driven by changes in attitudes about any one particular

office or level of office. As the bottom half of Table 2 makes clear, movement in political ambition occurred across all levels of office. Depending on the level of office in question, as many as 30% of the respondents shifted interest and either gained or lost ambition. Here, the importance of panel data is particularly evident, as cross-sectional data at two points in time would not uncover these individual-level shifts.

All changes in interest in running for office are important to document, but particularly noteworthy are cases in which individuals move across the threshold of having little political ambition to expressing a fair degree of interest in running for office, or vice versa. Table 3 presents a simple cross-tabulation of respondents' interest in running for office in 2001 with their interest in running in 2008; these data allow us to assess more specifically where the shifts in ambition occurred. The top row of the table, for instance, reveals that only one in four respondents who were definitely interested

<sup>3</sup>Professional background is not a statistically significant predictor of dynamic ambition at the bivariate level ( $p < .481$ ). Among lawyers, 24% lost interest in a future candidacy, while 14% gained interest. Twenty-three percent of businessmen and women lost interest, and 13% gained interest. Among activists, 24% expressed a decrease in political ambition, while 16% reported an increase. And 20% of educators lost interest in running for office, while 15% gained interest.



TABLE 2 Dynamic Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool

	Aggregate Levels of Political Ambition		Individual-Level Changes in Ambition	
	Frequency in Wave 1 (2001)	Frequency in Wave 2 (2008)	Gained Interest	Lost Interest
<b>Interest in Running for Office in the Future:</b>				
Definitely	3%	3%		
If the Opportunity Presented Itself	17	15		
No Interest Now, But Wouldn't Rule it Out Forever	56	51		
Absolutely Not	24	31		
Overall Levels of Change in Ambition Since 2001			15%	23%
<b>Interested in:</b>				
Local Level Office	56	60	17	13
State Level Office	40	38	12	14
Federal Level Office	25	20	7	12

Note: These data are based on the 1,810 respondents who answered the questions in both waves of the panel. Numbers do not add up to 100% for the levels of office in which respondents expressed interest because they could select multiple offices.

in running for office in 2001 remained certain in 2008 that they would run. Thirty-seven percent continued to have strong interest and thought that it was something they would like to do if the opportunity presented itself. Thirty-eight percent of the men and women who, seven years prior, definitely planned to run for office at some point in the future, no longer expressed a high degree of

interest or ambition. On the other end of the spectrum, more than a quarter of respondents who had ruled out running as a possibility in the first wave of the study were willing at the time of the second wave to consider it at least to some degree.

While some random movement across categories of political ambition over the course of seven years

TABLE 3 Widespread Shifts in Political Ambition Over Time: Cross-Tabulation Results of Interest in a Future Candidacy in 2001 and 2008

Interest in Running for Office at Some Point in the Future (Wave 1 - 2001)	Interest in Running for Office at Some Point in the Future (Wave 2 - 2008)			
	Definitely	If the Opportunity Presented Itself	No Interest Now, But Wouldn't Rule It Out Forever	Absolutely Not
Definitely (N=57)	25%	37	33	5
If the Opportunity Presented Itself (N=305)	7	43%	42	8
No Interest Now, But Wouldn't Rule it Out Forever (N=1,018)	1	11	67%	21
Absolutely Not (N=430)	1	3	23	73%

Note: These data are based on the 1,810 respondents who answered the question in both waves of the panel. The data presented in each row indicate levels of interest in running for office in 2008 (Wave 2), broken down by the level of political ambition the respondent expressed in 2001 (Wave 1). Entries in shaded boxes represent the percentage of respondents in each category from 2001 whose future ambition remained static across the panel. Entries to the left of the shaded boxes in each row indicate an increase in ambition from 2001; entries to the right of the shaded boxes indicate a decrease in ambition from 2001.

may occur, we would not anticipate such a high degree of change into and out of the two categories at the ends of the spectrum. When potential candidates report that they would “definitely” like to run for office someday, or that they would “rule it out forever,” their statements are rooted in strong convictions. Movement away from those positions, therefore, is likely the result of real change, either in terms of actual circumstances or perceptions. Indeed, when we compare these shifts in political ambition to changes in political attitudes that scholars tend to consider more durable, we see that the changes in ambition exceed changes in political ideology and party identification. In terms of political ideology, only 1% of potential candidates who considered themselves liberal in 2001 identified as conservative in 2008; the same is true when we consider movement from the conservative side to the liberal side of the ideological spectrum. The numbers for party identification are somewhat higher (4% of Republicans came to consider themselves Democrats; and 1% of Democrats became Republicans), but this is consistent with nationwide erosion of support for the Republican party.

Potential candidates’ actual behavior validates the substantial perceptual shifts in political ambition we uncovered during this seven-year period. Respondents were asked whether, between the two waves of the study, they took any concrete steps that tend to precede running for office: investigating how to place their name on the ballot, or discussing running for office with potential campaign contributors, party leaders, or community activists. Twelve percent of the women and men in the candidate eligibility pool took at least one new concrete step between the two waves of the panel. Fifty-four individuals actually launched a campaign since they were first surveyed in 2001. And 40 potential candidates began serving in some elective capacity between 2001 and 2008. The new concrete steps taken by the potential candidates confirm that dynamic ambition is not simply perceptual. More specifically, respondents whose ambition for a future candidacy increased over time were twice as likely to take at least one new concrete step as were those who reported no such increase (difference significant at  $p < .01$ ).

### **Explaining Dynamic Ambition: Multivariate Analysis**

Together, the results presented in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that, among the pool of potential candidates,

the formation of political ambition at the earliest stages is certainly *dynamic*. In order to determine why some potential candidates gain or lose interest in running for office, we developed a series of logistic regression equations. Table 4 presents our first two models, which track broad changes in political ambition between the two waves of the study. The left-hand column reports ordered logit coefficients for an equation that predicts change in ambition using a 7-point scale. As we report in Tables 2 and 3, respondents could have scored between a 1 (“absolutely no interest in a future candidacy”) and a 4 (“definitely plan to run in the future”) on the ambition continuum at both points in time. Respondents, therefore, could have experienced a maximum gain in ambition of +3 and a maximum loss in ambition of -3, which results in a 7-point ordinal measure. As Table 3 demonstrates, though, roughly a third of the movement in ambition occurs between the middle two categories of the scale: “If the opportunity presented itself” and “No interest now, but wouldn’t rule it out forever.” Because these categories are perhaps not as distinct as the two endpoints of the ambition continuum, we also perform our analysis with a dependent variable that collapses these middle two categories. The ordered logit model presented in the right-hand column of Table 4 measures change in ambition on a 5-point scale. Here, respondents could have scored between a 1 (“absolutely no interest in a future candidacy”) and a 3 (“definitely plan to run in the future”) at both points in time. This more conservative 5-point ordinal measure of ambition allows for a maximum gain in ambition of +2 and a maximum loss in ambition of -2.

The models operationalize the five research expectations we identified (see Appendix A for a description of the variable coding). We also include a series of controls that tap into changes in the political environment potential candidates might have faced between the two waves of the study. Certainly, many aspects of the electoral environment—such as political culture and levels of legislative professionalization—tend not to change over time. But potential candidates often relocate, and political shifts in a state can also result in changes in the electoral environment. Thus, we control for whether a potential candidate moved, became more ideologically congruent with the area in which he/she resides, or saw an increase in the number of open seats. We also control for changes in a state’s Democratic presidential vote share, since shifts in party strength may affect not only candidate emergence, but also patterns of political recruitment. In addition, the models control for race, sex, age, and current party

**TABLE 4** Movement in Political Ambition: Ordinal Logistic Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors) Predicting Potential Candidates' Changes in Interest in Running for Office

	Change in Ambition (7-Point Scale)	Change in Ambition (5-Point Scale)
<b>Changes in Perceptions of the Political Environment</b>		
Became More Cynical About Politics	-.48 (.11) **	-.49 (.13) **
Increase in Self-Perceived Qualifications to Run	.31 (.06) **	.36 (.07) **
<b>Changes in Political Recruitment</b>		
Recently Recruited by a Political Actor	.94 (.13) **	.87 (.15) **
<b>Changes in Life Circumstances</b>		
No Longer Married	-.21 (.25)	-.05 (.28)
Newly Married	-.30 (.21)	.11 (.25)
Had a Child	.54 (.19) **	.58 (.22) **
Had a Child Move Out of the House	.10 (.12)	.10 (.14)
Dealt with a Serious Personal or Family Illness	-.08 (.11)	.03 (.13)
Retired	.33 (.19)	.41 (.22)
<b>Changes in Professional Status</b>		
Career Change	.14 (.15)	.11 (.17)
Took on More Responsibilities at Work	.29 (.12) *	.19 (.13)
Increase in Income	.10 (.08)	.11 (.09)
<b>Changes in Predictors of Political Engagement</b>		
Increase in Political Participation	.07 (.04)	.05 (.04)
Increase in Political Interest	.11 (.04) *	.08 (.05)
Change in Political Ideology (Conservative)	-.12 (.11)	.02 (.13)
<b>Controls for the Political Environment</b>		
Increase in State's Presidential Democratic Vote Share	.01 (.03)	-.00 (.03)
Moved	.19 (.17)	-.01 (.19)
Incongruent with Political Landscape	-.23 (.13)	-.14 (.15)
Term Limits	-.21 (.12)	-.26 (.14)
Baseline Level of Political Ambition (in Wave 1)	-1.67 (.09) **	-1.27 (.10) **
(Threshold -3)	-10.91 (.80) **	
(Threshold -2)	-7.72 (.37) **	-9.84 (.79) **
(Threshold -1)	-4.77 (.31) **	-4.64 (.35) **
(Threshold 0)	-.92 (.28) **	.24 (.31)
(Threshold +1)	1.68 (.33) **	3.79 (.55) **
(Threshold +2)	3.30 (.52) **	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.32	.23
N	1,553	1,553

Note: Levels of significance: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ . Equations also include controls for age, race, sex, and party identification. The reduced sample sizes (down from 1,810) in both equations result from list-wise deletion. Levels of statistical significance and the magnitude of the coefficients withstand fixed effects for each of the professions.

identification. Each model also controls for the respondent's placement on the ambition scale in 2001.<sup>4</sup>

A general review of the findings indicates that the models perform well and that dynamic political ambition is shaped by a variety of changes in political

attitudes, experiences, and life circumstances. Regardless of whether we code the change in political ambition using the 7-point or the 5-point scale, potential candidates' shifting levels of internal and external political efficacy, as well as changing patterns of political recruitment, account for the most variation in gains and losses in interest in running for office. More specifically, potential candidates were more likely to lose ambition for a future run when their levels of cynicism increased. Conversely, potential candidates who offered stronger self-assessments of their qualifications to run for office, or who were

<sup>4</sup>We performed the regression analyses separately on each professional subsample. Our results did not reveal any substantively or statistically meaningful differences. In terms of geographic effects, neither dummy variables for region, nor state fixed effects, achieve statistical significance. Sex, race, and party identification are also not statistically significant predictors of changes in political ambition.

recruited to run between the two waves of the study, were significantly more likely to gain ambition to run for office in the future. A new child, as well as the baseline level of political ambition, achieves statistical significance in both equations as well.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond general changes in ambition, the data allow us to examine more dramatic shifts in interest in office-seeking. The binary logistic regression equations presented in Table 5 predict movement into the two endpoints of our political ambition continuum: definitely planning to run for office and dismissing completely the possibility of a future candidacy. An examination of movement into these categories over the course of the seven years between the two waves of the panel captures more specifically the magnitude of change illustrated by the analysis shown in Table 4. The regression coefficients indicate that the same factors that drive incremental movement along the 5-point political ambition scale largely also explain dramatic movement across levels of interest in running for office. Four of the five sets of variables are statistically significant predictors of relatively dramatic shifts in ambition, and all behave in the hypothesized direction.

Further, the panel provides an opportunity to determine what factors affect gains and losses in political ambition for the subsamples of respondents who exhibited a high degree of ambition in 2001, compared to those who exhibited no ambition. In other words, we can identify what caused an ambitious individual to lose interest in running for office, as well as what spurred someone with no political ambition to express interest in office-holding. The binary logistic regression coefficients presented in Table 6 indicate that changes in internal and external efficacy, recent recruitment experiences, new marriages, and relocations all shed light on how previously unambitious individuals acquire interest in office seeking. Changes in perceptions of the electoral environment and in recruitment experiences also account for losses in ambition among respondents who were previously highly ambitious.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>As indicated in Table 3, taking on more responsibilities at work, as well as an increase in political interest, also attain significance when we use the 7-point ordinal measure. It appears, therefore, that the effects of these variables may be driven, at least in part, from the way we code the change in ambition. To err on the side of caution and ensure that we do not attribute substantive findings to possible measurement error, we emphasize the results from the 5-point scale with the collapsed middle categories.

<sup>6</sup>Because of the small number of respondents who reported “definite interest” in a future candidacy in 2001, the regression equation predicting loss of ambition among this group cannot control for all of the variables used to predict dynamic ambition. The equation presented in the second column of Table 5 includes as fully specified a model as possible.

Somewhat surprisingly, changes in traditional predictors of political engagement provide little or no leverage in explaining dynamic ambition. Perhaps increases in conventional indicators of political engagement and interest lead to more political involvement behind the scenes, such as volunteering for a campaign or contributing money. But these increases in activism and the concomitant exposure to the political system they bring do not propel potential candidates’ political ambition. As expected, neither changes in a state’s Democratic presidential vote share, nor an increase in the number of open seats, contributes to changes in broad interest in holding office.<sup>7</sup> Even moving to a new locality that a respondent perceives as ideologically incongruent with his/her own views does not depress interest in running for office. Fluctuations in political ambition, therefore, are far more complex than a mere reflection of changes in conventional indicators of political engagement or the electoral environment.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the results that emerge from the regression analyses are consistent with our expectations. Two broad findings merit further discussion, though, both because of the magnitude of their impact and because they speak to the theoretical and methodological importance of examining dynamic ambition.

### **Changing Efficacy as a Candidate: A Complex Predictor of Dynamic Ambition**

The first central finding to emerge from the multivariate analyses pertains to respondents’ perceptions of their efficacy as candidates. A substantive interpretation of the regression coefficients across equations reveals that changes in a general sense of efficacy as a candidate, as gauged by shifts in how “qualified” respondents consider themselves, exert a substantial impact on the evolution of political ambition. Consider, for example, respondents who considered themselves “very qualified” to run for office in 2008, but who self-assessed as “not at all qualified” in 2001.

<sup>7</sup>We also performed our regression analyses controlling for political culture, size and openness of the political environment, and levels of legislative professionalization. None of these variables achieved statistical significance and their inclusion did not affect any of the other substantive results.

<sup>8</sup>We also performed separate regression analyses predicting change in ambition for the subsamples of respondents who expressed interest in local, state, and federal offices, including only the electoral variables that would be expected to have an effect (i.e., the term limits variable for state level office, but not local office; the Democratic presidential vote share for federal level office, but not local office). In each of these cases, the structural variables still failed to achieve statistical significance.

**TABLE 5** Dramatic Movement in Political Ambition: Logistic Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors) Predicting Potential Candidates' Movement into the Categories of Most and Least Ambitious

	Moved into the "Definitely Plan to Run in the Future" Category	Moved into the "Absolutely No Interest in Running" Category
<b>Changes in Perceptions of the Political Environment</b>		
Became More Cynical About Politics	-1.03 (.42) *	.54 (.19) **
Increase in Self-Perceived Qualifications to Run	.83 (.23) **	-.24 (.10) *
<b>Changes in Political Recruitment</b>		
Recently Recruited by a Political Actor	1.90 (.42) **	-.86 (.23) **
<b>Changes in Life Circumstances</b>		
No Longer Married	-.32 (1.10)	.33 (.37)
Newly Married	-.11 (.84)	.63 (.29) *
Had a Child	.46 (.65)	-.97 (.37) **
Had a Child Move Out of the House	.13 (.44)	.10 (.19)
Dealt with a Serious Personal or Family Illness	-.27 (.41)	.10 (.17)
Retired	.62 (.60)	.03 (.31)
<b>Changes in Professional Status</b>		
Career Change	-.02 (.51)	-.15 (.24)
Took on More Responsibilities at Work	-.35 (.43)	-.34 (.18) *
Increase in Income	-.33 (.30)	-.17 (.12)
<b>Changes in Predictors of Political Engagement</b>		
Increase in Political Participation	.04 (.12)	-.02 (.05)
Increase in Political Interest	.22 (.16)	-.06 (.06)
Change in Political Ideology (Conservative)	.89 (.42) *	.14 (.18)
<b>Controls for the Political Environment</b>		
Increase in State's Presidential Democratic Vote Share	-.12 (.10)	-.02 (.05)
Moved	-.99 (.81)	-.14 (.26)
Incongruent with Political Landscape	.13 (.48)	.14 (.20)
Term Limits	-.55 (.53)	.08 (.18)
Constant	-4.62 (.86) **	-1.28 (.35) **
Percent Correctly Predicted	97.8	82.7
N	1,376	1,062

Notes: Levels of significance: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ . Each equation is restricted to the sub-sample of the 1,810 respondents who did not already fall in the category of the dependent variable in 2001. Equations also include controls for age, race, sex, and party identification. The reduced sample sizes in both equations result from list-wise deletion. Levels of statistical significance and the magnitude of the coefficients withstand fixed effects for each of the professions.

These women and men are nearly three times as likely as an otherwise "average" respondent who experienced no change in self-perceived qualifications to run for office to have moved into the category of "definitely interested" in running for office.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, potential candidates who considered themselves "not at all qualified" to run in 2008, but who self-assessed as "very qualified" seven years before, are 10 percentage points more likely than those whose perceptions did not change to have moved into the category of

"absolutely not" interested in running for office (0.28 predicted probability, compared to 0.18).

Granted, most respondents did not move from one end of the qualifications continuum to the other. But even a one-unit decrease in self-assessments—from "very qualified" to "qualified," for example—increases by 4 percentage points the likelihood that a potential candidate will write off completely the possibility of running for office at some point in the future. This finding is far reaching, as nearly 50% of respondents reported some shift in their self-assessed qualifications; 33% considered themselves more qualified in 2008 than they were in 2001, and 16% assessed as less qualified. Clearly, perceptions of qualifications

<sup>9</sup>Our analysis is based on the regression coefficients presented in Table 4. We hold all continuous independent variables at their sample means and all dummy variables at their sample modes.

**TABLE 6** Explaining Changes among the Politically Ambitious and Unambitious Across the Panel Study: Logistic Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors)

	Gained Ambition (Subsample who Reported “Absolutely No Interest in Running” in Wave 1)	Lost Ambition (Subsample who Reported “Definite Interest” in Running in Wave 1)
<b>Changes in Perceptions of the Political Environment</b>		
Became More Cynical About Politics	-.63 (.28) *	4.77 (2.88) <sup>†</sup>
Increase in Self-Perceived Qualifications to Run	.51 (.14) **	-5.14 (2.81) <sup>†</sup>
<b>Changes in Political Recruitment</b>		
Recently Recruited by a Political Actor	1.20 (.35) **	-7.24 (3.69) *
<b>Changes in Life Circumstances</b>		
No Longer Married	-.21 (.56)	-
Newly Married	.99 (.50) *	-
Had a Child	.11 (.56)	-
Had a Child Move Out of the House	-.03 (.28)	-
Dealt with a Serious Personal or Family Illness	.29 (.29)	2.20 (2.11)
Retired	.18 (.44)	-
<b>Changes in Professional Status</b>		
Career Change	.51 (.41)	-4.55 (3.13)
Took on More Responsibilities at Work	.61 (.29)	3.53 (2.42)
Increase in Income	.12 (.20)	-1.91 (1.26)
<b>Changes in Predictors of Political Engagement</b>		
Increase in Political Participation	.07 (.08)	-1.09 (.71)
Increase in Political Interest	.09 (.12)	-1.93 (1.23)
Change in Political Ideology (Conservative)	.02 (.28)	-
<b>Controls for the Political Environment</b>		
Increase in State’s Presidential Democratic Vote Share	.01 (.07)	-
Moved	.84 (.41) *	-
Term Limits	-.16 (.30)	-
Constant	-.69 (.57)	5.93 (3.43) <sup>†</sup>
Percent Correctly Predicted	77.2	83.8
N	346	37

Note: Levels of significance: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; †  $p < .10$ . Each equation is restricted to the sub-sample of the 1,810 respondents who fell in the category of the dependent variable in 2001. Equations also include controls for age, race, sex, and party identification. The reduced sample sizes in both equations result from list-wise deletion. In the second equation, several variables are omitted because of multicollinearity problems associated with the small sample size. Accordingly, for this equation, we consider  $p < .10$  to be statistically meaningful. Levels of statistical significance and the magnitude of the coefficients withstand fixed effects for each of the professions.

are not static gauges of concrete accomplishments or abilities that prepare potential candidates to run for office. The members of the sample, after all, are roughly similar in terms of objective qualifications and credentials, yet widespread variation in perceptions of qualifications exist within the candidate eligibility pool.

Whereas recognizing individual-level shifts in qualifications is rather straightforward, identifying the underpinnings of potential candidates’ changing self-assessments is more complex. Respondents who were recruited to run for office between the two waves of the study, as well as those who engaged in more acts of political participation in 2008, as compared to 2001, were more likely to report stronger

self-assessments of their qualifications. But changes in career status, income, family dynamics, and interest in politics fail to offer any leverage on changes in respondents’ perceptions of their qualifications to run. Even changes in external political efficacy, attitudes toward politics, and exposure to politicians, campaigns, and political institutions fail to shift self-perceived qualifications. Baseline demographics, such as race, age, sex, and party identification, are also not statistically significant. Quantitative measures may be limited in the extent to which they can capture the roots of what leads respondents to consider themselves qualified. These perceptions may be deeply rooted in personal psychology and idiosyncratic

ruminations and visions of a candidacy. Though we can pinpoint only some of the sources of changes in these assessments, it is imperative to recognize the manner in which they fluctuate, and the substantive impact they exert on explaining gains and losses in potential candidates' political ambition.

### The Impact of Political Cynicism on Interest in Running for Office

Our regression analyses also reveal that heightened levels of political cynicism not only pervade the candidate eligibility pool, but also play a critical role in accounting for potential candidates' net decrease in interest in running for office. All else equal, a potential candidate who grew more cynical about politics and the political system between the two waves of the study is 46% more likely than his/her counterpart whose levels of political cynicism did not change to lose all ambition to run for office (and move into the "absolutely no interest in running" category). More specifically, an "average" respondent with no change in cynicism has a 0.19 predicted probability of having lost all interest in running for office. The likelihood of having moved into the "absolutely not" category grows to 0.28 in cases in which the "average" respondent grew more cynical.

Because 62% of respondents became more cynical between 2001 and 2008, the increased cynicism that depresses political ambition more than offsets the heightened levels of political ambition triggered by increases in self-assessed qualifications.

The strong impact that cynicism exerts on political ambition is particularly important because changes in political cynicism appear to be directly linked to the shifting sands of the political context. Similar to Cook and Gronke's (2005) assessment that Americans' trust in government increased following September 11, 2001, and then gradually declined, we find that contemporary political dynamics also exert an impact on potential candidates' levels of political cynicism. Table 7 presents the results of a logistic regression equation predicting whether a respondent grew more cynical between the two waves of the panel study. Controlling for the conventional predictors of political trust and efficacy, the results indicate that animosity toward the Bush Administration, frustration with the gridlocked Democratic majority in Congress, and increased attention to foreign affairs all increase the likelihood that a respondent grew more cynical about politics and the political process. And the substantive effects of the political context are striking. A respondent with

TABLE 7 Predicting Increased Levels of Cynicism Since 2001 Logistic Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors)

	Has Become More Cynical About Politics
<b>Current Political Context</b>	
Began Following Foreign Affairs More Closely	.59 (.12) **
Animosity Toward Bush Administration	.46 (.19) *
Frustration with Democrats in Congress	1.14 (.14) **
Number of Political Leaders Considered Inspiring	-.05 (.03)
Animosity Toward Bush Administration * Democrat	.76 (.32) *
Frustrated with Democrats in Congress * Republican	-.20 (.27)
<b>Baseline Predictors of Political Cynicism</b>	
Sex (Female)	-.17 (.12)
Black	-.12 (.22)
Latino/a	.03 (.25)
Age	-.01 (.01)
Democrat	-.88 (.32) **
Republican	-.07 (.29)
Change in Household Income	.08 (.08)
Change in Political Interest	.03 (.04)
Political Junkie	-.05 (.05)
Constant	1.15 (.44) **
Percent Correctly Predicted	69.3
N	1,595

Note: Levels of significance: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ . The equation also controls for the respondent's level of political cynicism in the 2001 survey. The reduced sample size results from list-wise deletion. Levels of statistical significance and the magnitude of the coefficients withstand fixed effects for each of the professions.

no more interest in following foreign affairs in 2008 than in 2001, and who had not grown increasingly frustrated with the Bush Administration or the Democratic Congress, has a 0.39 likelihood of having become more cynical. A heightened awareness of foreign affairs, coupled with frustration with both the executive and legislative branches of the federal government, however, increases the predicted probability of increased cynicism to 0.92.<sup>10</sup>

While we do not purport to have developed a fully specified model of changes in political cynicism, we do uncover compelling evidence that the contemporary political context and the manner in which potential candidates view the federal government and its players affect attitudes toward the political system at all levels. Indeed, heightened levels of cynicism predict decreases in political ambition even when we restrict the sample only to people with interest in state and local office. Relatively short-term changes in the political environment at the national level—such as assessments of a presidential administration or a change in congressional leadership—can, therefore, leave a significant imprint on an individual's attitudes toward entering all levels of the political system as a candidate. Even if the seven years between the two waves of the study represent a “worst case scenario” in that presidential and congressional approval ratings sank to historic lows, the fact remains that these somewhat unique times carried long-term consequences for political ambition and engagement with the democratic process.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the concluding chapter of *Born to Run*, Gaddie encourages political scientists to acknowledge the evolution of political ambition: “Efforts to craft theories of ambition and careers need to incorporate the notion that ambitions are not always fully conceptualized when a politician seeks office and that personal and political events will shape ambition through the career and the life” (2004, 199). Based on the results from the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, we demonstrate that dynamic ambition is at work well in advance of the realization of a candidacy. Indeed, our empirical findings reveal that, over the course of seven years, nearly 40% of the panel respondents exhibited fluctuations in their levels of interest in pursuing a

candidacy. Between the two waves of the study, a significant number of respondents gained strong interest in running for office, while an even larger group became adamantly opposed to running. Importantly, changes in political participation do not account for the shifts we uncovered. Rather, changes in internal and external political efficacy, as well as patterns of political recruitment and family circumstances, explain the individual-level changes in political ambition we identified. These results suggest that ebbs and flows in interest in running for office precede the decision to enter an actual race at a given time. Political scientists, therefore, must continue to turn their attention to the earliest stages of the candidate emergence process and recognize its dynamic nature.

Our findings also have implications for political accountability, which is predicated on the notion that a large, engaged group of citizens will develop and sustain an interest in seeking elective office. Competitive elections draw larger voter turnouts, encourage greater citizen political engagement, and heighten elected officials' responsiveness to their constituents (Streb and Bareto 2007; see also Jacobson 2001). Because competition is a central criterion for evaluating the quality of elections, the viability of our electoral system and representative democracy are degraded when a broad group of citizens are not willing to enter the electoral arena and climb the political career ladder.

In this vein, our results provide mixed prospects. The majority of potential candidates convey a willingness to run for office if the opportunity presents itself and the circumstances are right; only three in ten rule out the possibility completely. That said, the political tumult of the seven years between the two waves of the study appears to have pushed many qualified, well-situated potential candidates away from considering a run for elective office. Hotly and bitterly contested presidential elections, such as the 2004 general election for president and the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, may increase mass-level political participation. But the hyperpartisan bickering that dominated Washington for the seven years between the two waves of the study, coupled with polarizing political leaders on both sides of the aisle and controversial government actions at home and abroad, have taken their toll as far as candidate emergence is concerned. The net decrease in political ambition in the candidate eligibility pool indicates that serving in office has become less appealing. Dynamic ambition, therefore, is a powerful barometer of civic engagement and, accordingly, must continue to be incorporated into theories of candidate emergence and used to measure the health of democracy in the United States.

<sup>10</sup>The substantive effects of animosity toward the Bush Administration and frustration with the Democratic Congress are comparable in size; each increases the likelihood of growing more cynical by 13–14 percentage points. Increased attention to foreign affairs exerts a smaller effect (5 percentage points).



## Appendix A Variable Description

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
<b>DEPENDENT VARIABLES</b>				
Change in Interest in Running for Office (5-Point Scale)	-2 - 2	-0.07	0.50	Indicates the respondent's level of movement in political ambition between the two waves of the study. The maximum loss in ambition is -2 steps on the 5-point continuum; the maximum gain in ambition is +2 steps on the scale.
Change in Interest in Running for Office (7-Point Scale)	-3 - 3	-0.09	-0.72	Indicates the respondent's level of movement in political ambition between the two waves of the study. The maximum loss in ambition is -3 steps on the 7-point continuum; the maximum gain in ambition is +3 steps on the scale.
Became More Cynical About Politics	0, 1	0.62	0.48	Indicates whether respondent, between the two waves of the study, became more cynical about politics and the political process (1) or not (0).
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Changes in Perceptions of the Political Environment</b>				
Became More Cynical About Politics	0, 1	0.62	0.48	Indicates whether respondent, between the two waves of the study, became more cynical about politics and the political process (1) or not (0).
Change in Self-Perceived Qualifications to Run	-3 - 3	0.24	0.87	Indicates change in respondent's level of self-perceived qualifications for holding elective office. Ranges from "not at all qualified" (1) to "very qualified" (4) for each point in time. Negative numbers indicate lower levels of self-perceived qualifications in 2008 than in 2001.
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Changes in Political Recruitment</b>				
Recently Recruited by a Political Actor	0, 1	0.23	0.42	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent was recruited by at least one elected official, party leader, or political activist (1) or not (0).
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Changes in Life Circumstances</b>				
No Longer Married	0, 1	0.06	0.23	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent separated, divorced, or became widowed (1) or not (0).
Newly Married	0, 1	0.07	0.26	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent married (1) or not (0).
Had a Child	0, 1	0.31	0.46	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent had a child (1) or not (0).
Had Child Move Out of the House	0, 1	0.31	0.46	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent's child(ren) moved out of the house (1) or not (0).
Dealt with a Serious Personal or Family Illness	0, 1	0.56	0.50	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent dealt with a personal or family illness (1) or not (0).
Retired	0, 1	0.09	0.29	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent retired from his/her job (1) or not (0).
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Changes in Professional Status</b>				
Career Change	0, 1	0.17	0.38	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent changed jobs (1) or not (0).
Took on More Responsibilities at Work	0, 1	0.56	0.50	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent took on more responsibilities at work (1) or not (0).

## Appendix A (Continued)

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
Change in Income	-4 - 4	0.25	0.74	Difference in respondent's income, in intervals, between the two waves of the study. Positive numbers indicate higher income in 2008 than in 2001. Negative numbers indicate lower income in 2008 than in 2001.
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Changes in Predictors of Political Engagement</b>				
Change in Political Participation	-9 - 7	0.10	1.79	Difference in number of the following political acts respondent participated in during 2007, compared to 2000: voted, contacted elected official, joined or paid dues to an interest group, wrote letter to a newspaper, contributed money to a campaign, volunteered for a candidate, volunteered on a community project, attended a political meeting, served on board of a non-profit organization. Negative numbers indicate lower levels of political engagement in 2008 than in 2001.
Change in Political Interest	-6 - 5	0.17	1.34	Indicates change in how closely respondent follows local and national news. Ranges from not closely (2) to very closely (8) at each point in time. Negative numbers indicate lower levels of political interest in 2008 than in 2001.
Change in Political Ideology	-2 - 2	-0.04	0.50	Indicates change in respondent's self-identification as liberal, moderate, or conservative. Negative numbers indicate a move in the liberal direction.
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Controls for the Political Environment</b>				
Change in State's Democratic Presidential Vote Share	-5.8 - 3.9	-1.83	1.94	The difference in John Kerry's 2004 and Al Gore's 2000 vote share in each respondent's state. Positive numbers indicate an increase in a state's Democratic presidential vote share.
Moved	0, 1	0.14	0.35	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent moved (1) or not (0).
Incongruent with Political Landscape	0, 1	0.22	0.41	Indicates whether respondent currently perceives living in a political climate that is incongruent with his/her party identification and political ideology.
Term Limits	0, 1	0.30	0.46	Indicates whether respondent lives in a state with term limits for state legislators (1) or not (0).
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Current Political Context</b>				
Began Following Foreign Affairs More Closely	0, 1	0.63	0.48	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent began following foreign affairs more closely (1) or not (0).
Animosity Toward the Bush Administration	0, 1	0.69	0.46	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent increased his/her animosity toward the Bush Administration (1) or not (0).
Frustration with Democrats in Congress	0, 1	0.60	0.49	Indicates whether, between the two waves of the study, respondent grew increasingly frustrated with the Democrats in Congress (1) or not (0).
Number of Political Leaders Considered Inspiring	0 - 12	3.00	2.10	Indicates how many of the following the respondent considers "inspirational": George Bush, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Rudy Giuliani, Al Gore, John McCain, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi, Condoleezza Rice, Bill Richardson, Mitt Romney.

## Appendix A (Continued)

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: Controls, Baselines, and Demographics</b>				
Sex (Female)	0, 1	0.47	0.50	Indicates whether respondent is a woman (1) or a man (0).
Black	0, 1	0.08	0.27	Indicates whether respondent is African American (1) or not (0).
Latino/a	0, 1	0.06	0.23	Indicates whether respondent is Latino/a (1) or not (0).
Age	27 – 90	53.44	9.98	Indicates respondent's age.
Democrat	0, 1	0.60	0.49	Indicates whether respondent is a Democrat (1) or not (0).
Republican	0, 1	0.31	0.46	Indicates whether respondent is a Republican (1) or not (0).
Political "Junkie"	0 – 5	1.44	1.28	Indicates how many of the following activities in which respondent engages at least a few times each week: listens to talk radio; watches CSPAN; watches FOX News; watches CNN; reads political websites.
Level of Future Interest in Running for Office in 2001	1 – 4	1.95	0.71	Indicates respondent's 2001 level of interest in running for office at some point in the future. Ranges from "absolutely not" (1) to "definitely something I want to do" (4).
Level of External Political Efficacy / Cynicism in 2001	1 – 5	2.81	0.98	Indicates whether respondent agreed, in 2001, that government officials pay attention to people like him/her. Ranges from strongly disagrees (1) to strongly agrees (5).

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