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RESEARCH

The gendered political ambition cycle in mixed-member electoral systems

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This article introduces a theoretical model that shows how four mechanisms (work–life balance, psychological, gatekeeper bias and diversity mechanisms) explain why pursuing a nomination as list Members of Parliament is the more attractive option for women in mixed-member electoral systems. It also demonstrates how women’s resulting greater likelihood of being list Members of Parliament creates what we call a gendered cycle, further reducing women’s interest in the single-member district tier. To empirically test our model, we present quantitative data for the case of New Zealand and Germany, as well as qualitative interview data collected from members of German parties’ women’s auxiliary organisations.

key words gender • political ambition • mixed-member proportional system • Germany • New Zealand • electoral systems

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Introduction

Male over-representation in politics is a universal phenomenon, and scholars have found that women are less politically ambitious than their male peers.¹ This gender gap in political ambition may stem from individual-level ‘supply-side’ factors such as women’s distaste for electoral competition or their lack of self-confidence (for example, Lawless and Fox, 2010; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Preece and Stoddard, 2015). However, some have questioned whether the political ambition gap is primarily due to gendered socialisation and women’s resulting personal attitudes (for example, Piscopo, 2018). They argue that women’s lower level of political ambition is due to ‘demand-side’ factors or gendered aspects of the political system as a whole. As Schlesinger (1966: 8) observed decades ago, ‘ambition for office, like other ambitions, develops with a specific situation, that it is a response to the possibilities which lie before a person’. In other words, potentially interested political candidates will

weigh the costs and benefits to pursuing elective office and will adjust their ambition depending on the opportunities they see (for example, [Shames, 2017](#)). One critical institution shaping men's and women's odds of winning office is the electoral system (for example, [Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2019](#)), with women being better represented in countries with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems compared with countries with single-member district (SMD) electoral systems (for example, [Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010](#)). If [Schlesinger's \(1966\)](#) argument holds, and women's lack of political ambition would be a rational response to gendered political opportunities, then women would thus be expected to be more ambitious in PR compared with SMD systems.

Empirically, however, it is difficult to establish to what extent women's and men's political ambition is shaped by institutional factors, such as electoral systems, or by individual-level factors, such as self-confidence. It is not possible for scholars to re-socialise men and women to establish whether different individual traits would close the ambition gap, nor are there many opportunities to hold socialisation constant and change the gendered institutional hurdles to running for office. However, countries in which mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral systems are employed offer unique opportunities for scholars to isolate the role played by electoral institutions in shaping men's and women's political ambition. These systems hold individuals' personal traits and socialisation constant while varying the electoral system. If the gendered ambition gap is not only due to individual-level factors, but also, as [Schlesinger \(1966\)](#) hypothesises, 'a response to possibilities', we would expect women and men in countries employing MMP to exhibit different levels of ambition for list positions than district candidacies because of their gendered nature.

The central focus of our article is to outline mechanisms – including both demand- and supply-side factors – through which we believe the two tiers in MMP systems shape men's and women's political ambition differently, explaining why we expect gendered differences in political ambition across the tiers.² To that end, we develop an original model that we call 'a gendered cycle of political ambition' in MMP systems. Building on existing literature about PR and SMD electoral systems, we identify four mechanisms that explain why pursuing a nomination through the PR tier is the more attractive option for women: work–life balance, psychological, gatekeeper bias and diversity mechanisms. We go on to argue that these four mechanisms work together to create a self-reinforcing feedback loop, resulting in a cycle further reducing women's interest in the SMD tier. The reverse may be true of men as well, although the difference across tiers should be less pronounced for men because the costs of running in either tier are lower for men than for women.

Before presenting this theoretical model and putting it to a first test based on candidate data from New Zealand and Germany – two countries adopting MMP – as well as qualitative interviews conducted among a candidate pool in German parties' women's auxiliary organisations, we first introduce the two paths to elective office typical in MMP electoral systems.

Two paths to elective office in MMP electoral systems

An important characteristic of the design of MMP systems is that there are two types of MPs and two selectorates. On the one hand, there are district MPs, who are (s)elected directly in a constituency and therefore rely on support from their local party

organisation for their nomination and from their district's voters for their election. On the other hand, there are list MPs, who rely on their state/national party leaders for selection to a promising list position and on voters from across the country to support their party as a whole in the election.

The selectorates in each tier also tend to seek different attributes in a candidate (Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010; Steg, 2016). Local parties desire candidates with deep roots and name recognition within the constituency. Such nominees are expected to be generalists who can represent the diverse needs of the region; loyalty to regional needs is paramount. In contrast, state and national party leaders compiling a list seek to balance a range of considerations in order to broaden their list's appeal to the country's voters as a whole. These selectors are also mindful of the need to staff parliamentary committees following the election. As a result, list makers often desire specialist qualifications such as policy expertise, or credentials allowing an MP to speak on behalf of a particular social group.

Affirmative action measures such as quotas are rarely used for the election of district seats, and are instead more common for party lists (Davidson-Schmich, 2016); even where quotas are not employed for the list tier, it is often seen as a way to bring more diversity into Parliament (McLeay, 2006; Coffé, 2018). Moreover, women are more frequently elected as list MPs than district MPs in countries employing MMP, including Germany, Japan, Mexico and New Zealand (Davidson-Schmich, 2016; Piscopo, 2016; Vowles et al, 2017). Steele (2011) notes how PR list positions offer an opportunity in Japan for under-represented groups to enter politics given the high percentage of 'inherited' district seats in the Japanese political system. One of her interviewees 'pragmatically observed that the PR seats were the only viable means for a woman to win a mandate in the Diet' (Steele, 2011: 213).

Formally, there is no constitutional difference between list and district MPs in MMP systems. Both share the same basic roles in Parliament and are eligible for the same committee memberships and executive positions. In some MMP systems, however, there are informal differences in prestige between the tiers, with comparative analyses often finding list MPs to be perceived as less prestigious than district MPs (Shugart and Tan, 2016). Steele's (2011) work on Japan also shows an overall preference among (female) MPs for being elected as a district MP. Furthermore, in the case of New Zealand, district MPs – once in office – receive a higher expense allocation than list MPs (Directions of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, 2014). In Germany, list MPs are less likely to be selected for Bundestag leadership positions than district MPs (Kintz, 2019). District seats are typically also safer than list seats (Matland and Studlar, 2004).³

In addition, in the course of conducting prior research on political careers and parliamentary roles in Germany and New Zealand, Davidson-Schmich (2016) and Coffé (2018) encountered political actors who viewed the two tiers of the electoral system as offering distinct (dis)advantages to men and women. For example, one male New Zealand Labour MP claimed that "middle-aged, white heterosexual men should not be list MPs". One New Zealand female MP suggested that women are pushed towards specialising in the more feminine issues and committees handling such issues rather than becoming generalists – an important characteristic to obtain a district nomination. In a mail survey of candidate pool members in Germany, women believed that men were more likely to be nominated to appear on the ballot for a promising SMD than a woman, and both men and women agreed that a male

candidate was more likely to win an SMD election than a female candidate. Here, we begin to systematically theorise what impact these differing perceptions have on men's and women's political ambition in MMP systems.

Mechanisms gendering ambition in MMP systems

In the following, we delineate four mechanisms that result in the two MMP tiers being gendered in different ways, leading men and women to view their chances of success in each tier differently, and adjusting their aspirations accordingly.⁴ In particular, we hypothesise that women will rate their chances of obtaining a list position more highly than their chances of gaining an SMD seat – especially when quotas are used or where party lists are viewed as mechanisms for promoting diversity. Under these circumstances, men may be more likely to anticipate SMD success. Further, the combination of the four mechanisms creates a 'gendered cycle', reinforcing and strengthening this ambition gap in MMP systems. The mechanisms and model will primarily hold in parties with realistic chances of winning in both tiers, and to a lesser extent in smaller parties that tend to only have list MPs. The first two mechanisms – what we term the 'work–life' and 'psychological' mechanisms – are individual-level or 'supply-side' mechanisms, whereas the second two – what we term the 'gatekeeper bias' and 'diversity' mechanisms – occur at the systemic or 'demand-side' level (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993).

Work–life mechanism

In most countries around the world, women are disproportionately responsible for household labour and care work. Therefore, for many women, pursuing a political career means taking on a 'third shift' in addition to their professional and household burdens (Davidson-Schmich, 2016). Research among German MPs (Hansson, 2018: 638) confirms that 'women MPs experience stronger workloads within the home sphere than their male colleagues', suggesting that finding a satisfactory work–life balance is harder for female than male MPs. As a result, fewer women than men may consider aspiring to any elective office at all.

Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2017) find that women who did decide to run for elective office were more influenced by interpersonal relations than men who campaigned. For example, American women were more likely than American men to consider the age of their children as a 'very important factor' in their decision to run for office, suggesting that family considerations play a greater role in shaping women's than men's ambition. For those women who do harbour political aspirations, gender inequality in domestic work may render the pursuit of a promising list place more attractive than a quest for a district mandate. Being a district MP has been described as a one-and-a-half person job, based on the assumption that politicians have someone backing them up at home, allowing them to be omnipresent in their constituency (Steg, 2016: 254; Kletzing, 2017). As generalists, district MPs have to attend many functions across their district to serve a wide array of local groups (Siefken, 2013). These events frequently occur in the evenings or on weekends when childcare is often not available, making such appearances difficult for women to combine with their household responsibilities. New Zealand research on the time use of MPs (Coffé, 2017) confirms that male MPs spend more time on social activities

(organised by a party, Parliament or an association) than women do, which has been explained by the greater difficulty for women to combine social activities with their responsibilities within their private households. One female district MP interviewed by Reiser (2011: 254) described how she went about obtaining a ballot nomination: 'I hired a driver for six weeks and drove around to introduce myself to all the local delegates [voting on the nomination]. Here it's simply expected that one visits the delegates at home and has a beer with them.' In contrast, list MPs are more specialised and can, for example, develop a reputation for policy expertise through their paid employment, or claim to speak for a demographic group by virtue of their personal characteristics or involvement in an inner-party committee. Such professional or committee-related activities require more limited time commitments and/or occur during regular working hours when childcare is more likely to be available. Siefken's (2013) study of German MPs' grass-roots activities found that while both district and list MPs spent similar amounts of time in their constituencies, they engaged in different sorts of activities while present in their district. District MPs were more likely to attend (afterhours) social functions, whereas list MPs were more likely to meet with government agencies and interest groups. Therefore, for women with care responsibilities, pursuing a list nomination may be a lower-cost proposition than pursuing a district seat; moreover, as men are less often primary caregivers, they are less likely than women to view running in an SMD as the higher-cost option.

Psychological mechanism

Some research has indicated that women are more conflict avoidant (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2017), more election averse (Kanthak and Woon, 2015) and less motivated by personal power-related concerns than men (Shames, 2017). Additional scholarship documents a gendered confidence gap in qualifications (Lawless and Fox, 2010). Gendered confidence gaps stem from factors such as 'qualifications' for elective office being male-normed, a lack of encouragement by gatekeepers (Lawless and Fox, 2010), internalised bias keeping women from recognising their own qualifications and a lack of female role models (Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007). Overall, these psychological factors may lead women to see the PR tier as more attractive than the SMD tier; moreover, as men have been found more willing to compete and openly pursue personal power than women, they are not expected to shy away from the SMD tier.

Conflict-avoidant and election-averse women may avoid pursuing a district mandate because nomination for this tier requires winning a zero-sum competition against other aspirants. Only one candidate per party can receive the district's nomination. In contrast, the creation of a party list is a non-zero-sum game. As there are multiple positions available, women do not have to fear 'losing' in the pursuit of a nomination or displacing a fellow party member. In addition, women in political parties employing quotas – or parties viewing the list portion of the ballot as a way to achieve gender diversity – receive a strong signal that they *are* wanted on a party list.

Furthermore, the qualifications and qualities required to become a district MP or list MP differ. Name recognition and prestige in the community are crucial qualities to become a district MP, but they are also quite amorphous and hence subject to implicit biases (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000). District seats are often won by the same incumbent for years at a time, developing associations between the characteristics of the previous office holder and 'qualifications' to hold the post. As incumbents

have historically been men, it is difficult for women to view themselves as capable replacements. In contrast, male aspirants may have an easier time seeing themselves as an appropriate district candidate. As election campaigns for direct seats are more personalised than campaigns for the list tier, which focus more on the party as a whole, women who lack confidence may doubt their ability to win a direct seat on their own and prefer to pursue a place among other list candidates instead. Finally, given women's greater likelihood to be compelled to enter political life because of issue-based concerns and specific public policy issues (Preece and Stoddard, 2015), women may also find being a list MP more appealing as they tend to focus more on particular policy issues than district MPs.

Gatekeeper bias mechanism

However, hurdles to women's ambition, and support for men's ambition, are not only the result of individual-level or so-called 'supply-side' characteristics; they may also be rational responses to systemic or 'demand-side' factors such as gatekeeper biases. The literature on candidate selection documents various ways in which gatekeepers are biased against potential female candidates (for example, Bjarnegård, 2013; Crowder-Meyer, 2013). Of particular interest here is how these biases intersect with the nomination processes used in each electoral tier to shape the strategies pursued by female aspirants.

Research has found that when candidate nomination is less centralised and less formalised, as is the case in the district tier, women are less likely to be nominated and enter Parliament (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). Free from a need to balance a party list or consider post-election cabinet and committee needs, local gatekeepers are at liberty to indulge their implicit biases. As a result, gatekeepers may implicitly associate men with district seats. Research in Mexico shows how parties tend to nominate female candidates for a list seat or unsafe district seat, rather than for a safe or competitive district (Piscopo, 2016). Steele (2011) has also argued that the perceptions of local elites of a 'winning' candidate are a major barrier for women to enter the political arena.

Moreover, informal candidate selection from a small pool of local party members allows gatekeepers to rely more on homosocial capital to identify candidates, seeking a local man to be the next 'golden boy' ready to represent the district, just like the male predecessor did (Bjarnegård, 2013; Steg, 2016). When only one candidate can be chosen, party selectorates tend to choose male candidates, who are thought to be more likely to win. In addition, local gatekeepers are likely to seek a candidate who can serve as an incumbent for years to come. Due to caregiving responsibilities, women may have a difficult time convincing gatekeepers that they can, indeed, provide uninterrupted service (Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010). Finally, opaque nomination procedures may further discourage women who already lack confidence in their own qualifications and their ability to achieve work-life balance.

In contrast, nomination for party lists often entails a relatively centralised and formalised procedure, which tends to be an advantage for women as party leaderships can intervene to ensure the selection of candidates who might not gain nomination at the district level (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). While drawing up a list of candidates from across the state or country, gatekeepers may pay greater attention to potential candidates' expertise or ability to appeal to a specific segment of society, which is a selection method found in cross-national comparison to be conducive to women's

descriptive representation (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2019). Gatekeeper bias mechanisms may thus lead women to assess that they may fare better on the list portion than in the SMD tier. As we will discuss in greater detail later, this is especially likely when parties employ affirmative action measures for the list tier. In contrast, as men do not experience gatekeeper bias in the SMD tier, they are expected to be more ambitious for this type of nomination.

Diversity mechanism

The more formalised and centralised process of balancing a party list also offers selectors opportunities to engage in ticket balancing, nominating both male and female candidates (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). In addition, in MMP electoral systems where political parties have made a commitment to diversifying representatives, affirmative action measures are usually combined with the list portion of the ballot (Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010; Centellas, 2015). As a result of these measures in the PR tier, gatekeepers may feel less compelled to consider diversity as a criterion for the SMD tier. Therefore, to the degree that gatekeepers, aspirants, the media and the general public come to view the PR tier as the one appropriate for women's candidacies, this tier becomes further feminised, and the SMD tier further masculinised.

Both male and female aspirants and gatekeepers may develop a belief that the PR tier is the appropriate path for women to pursue, leaving constituency nominations for men (Steg, 2016). In fact, under these circumstances, gatekeepers may actively recruit female candidates for the list portion of the ballot, biasing gatekeepers *towards* recruiting female candidates in this tier (Davidson-Schmich, 2016). In addition, where parties use gender quotas to fill leading state or national inner-party offices, there may be more female gatekeepers present than in informal backroom discussions at the local level, and female gatekeepers make it more likely that other women will be selected as candidates (Cheng and Tavits, 2011). In sum, then, where the PR tier is associated with diversity promotion, we expect women to become more ambitious for that tier as their cost–benefit calculations will favour pursuing a safe party list position. This mechanism may also shape men's cost–benefit calculations, leading them to believe that their odds of gaining a nomination are better in the SMD than in the PR tier.

While the two demand-side mechanisms (the diversity and gatekeeper bias mechanisms) are related, they are distinct. In particular, the diversity mechanism does not involve selectors' informal or implicit attitudes, but rather concerns formal policies such as gender quotas, or external actors, such as feminist movements pressuring a party to present a diverse list. While gatekeeper bias is expected to be at work in most cases, the diversity mechanism will be particularly present in MMP systems where quotas are used or where the list tier is viewed as a way to promote women's candidacies.

Overall, the relative impact of each of the four presented mechanisms is likely to vary across individuals and national contexts. For example, women raising young children may experience the work–life balance mechanism as the most important shaper of political ambition, whereas childless women may be more sensitive to gatekeeper biases. In countries with legislated quotas for women, the diversity mechanism may be the strongest of the four; in states with very gender-inegalitarian social norms, supply-side and gatekeeper bias mechanisms may all exert equally strong influences. For (able-bodied, heterosexual, majority ethnic) men, the diversity mechanism is

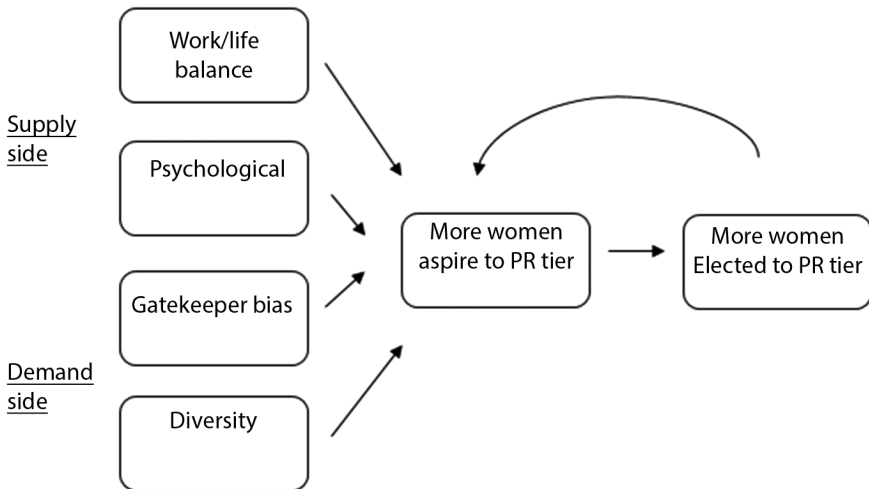
likely to exert the strongest effect as they are less likely than most women to have caregiving responsibilities, more likely to be confident in their own abilities and experience fewer gatekeeper biases for the SMD tier.

A gendered cycle

Figure 1 shows the four main mechanisms leading male and female aspirants in MMP systems to come to different cost–benefit calculations regarding the most promising electoral tier through which to pursue an initial entry into elective office. The division of household labour, women’s greater levels of conflict and election avoidance, gatekeeper bias, and parties’ attempts to use the list tier to diversify the ranks of their elected officials are all expected to make women view the pursuit of a promising list spot as a lower-cost option than pursuing an SMD tier nomination. Not only does the combination of the four mechanisms shape aspirations for each tier of the MMP system; together, they also shape descriptive representation itself, creating a ‘gendered cycle’. In countries using MMP systems, such as Bolivia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Germany and New Zealand, women have been more likely to be elected as list MPs than district MPs (Fortin-Rittberger and Eder, 2013; Centellas, 2015; Davidson-Schmich, 2016; Piscopo, 2016; Vowles et al, 2017; Barker and Coffé, 2018). Women’s greater likelihood of being elected as list MPs in previous elections provides an additional reason for female aspirants to see the list as the lower-cost tier to pursue, dimming their ambition to become a district MP. Combining the (reinforcing) effect of women’s descriptive representation with women’s disinclination to pursue a district seat in Parliament due to the four mechanisms discussed earlier, we provide a novel model of a gendered political ambition cycle in MMP electoral systems.

As men experience overall lower costs for running than women – due to their lesser burden of domestic responsibilities, gendered socialisation, homosocial capital and over-representation among elected officials – their ambition is expected to be less sensitive to electoral system incentives. Nonetheless, to the degree that men’s

Figure 1: The gendered cycle of political ambition in MMP systems



political ambition *is* conditioned by the dual electoral system, we expect that men will harbour greater ambitions for the district tier than the PR tier, especially in contexts where affirmative action measures are employed in the PR tier and the diversity mechanism is at work. Men's greater likelihood of being elected as district MPs provides an additional reason for male aspirants to believe that their odds are better in the SMD tier, increasing their ambition of becoming district MPs. Thus, the cycle shown in [Figure 1](#) is also expected to shape men's political ambitions.

The gendered cycle of political ambition in Germany and New Zealand

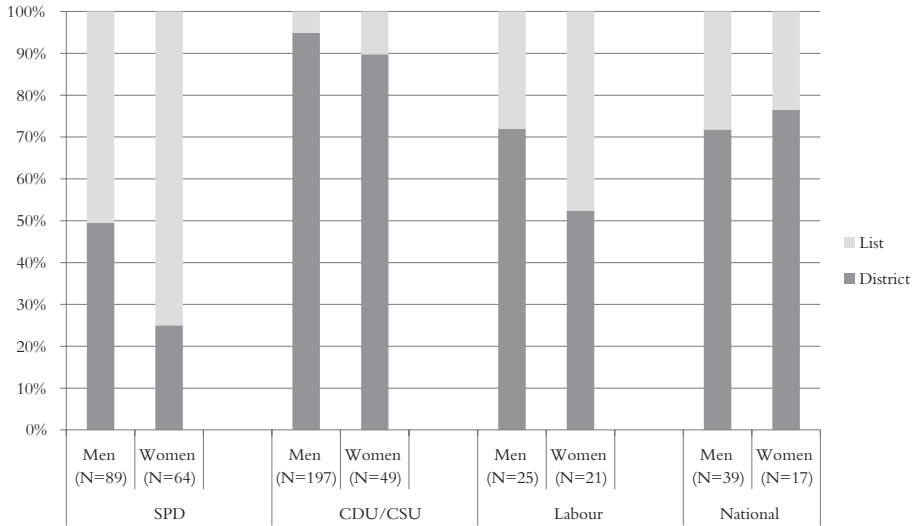
We put our model to a first test in the cases of Germany and New Zealand. The versions of MMP employed in New Zealand and Germany bear many similarities as Germany's system was the model for New Zealand's current electoral system ([Royal Commission on the Electoral System, 1986](#)). Each voter casts two votes, one for a party (PR tier) and one for a candidate to represent their district (SMD tier). The number of parliamentary seats elected via SMD is fixed from election to election: 299 seats in Germany and 71 in New Zealand.⁵ In contrast, the precise number of list MPs in both countries varies from election to election to ensure proportionality. The 52nd New Zealand Parliament (2017) has a total of 120 MPs, with 49 list seats. Germany's 19th Bundestag elected in 2017 comprises 709 MPs, including 410 list seats.

In neither country are primaries utilised to select list or district candidates. Instead, in Germany's federal system, each state-level party organisation draws up a list of candidates in each Bundesland; in New Zealand, a single national list is employed. Party leaders' lists are, in turn, approved in roughly the same order at meetings attended by delegates representing the party's rank and file. Both countries employ closed lists. The position that candidates receive on the list is thus crucial for their likelihood of election, giving a vital 'gatekeeping role' to the party in both cases. In Germany and New Zealand, district candidates are nominated by the members of their local party organisation, rendering these organisations crucial gatekeepers.

In both countries, the list tier is often seen as a way to bring more diversity into Parliament ([McLeay, 2006](#); [Coffé, 2018](#)). While neither New Zealand nor Germany employ electoral law quotas, many political parties in Germany and one in New Zealand have voluntarily adopted party quotas for this portion of the ballot ([Davidson-Schmich, 2016](#); [Vowles et al, 2017](#)). In Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Left Party employ a 50 per cent quota for Bundestag lists, and the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) 'quorum' requires at least one woman among every three list positions. Of the New Zealand parties, only the Green Party requires a gender-blended list, which employs a 'zipper' quota, alternating male and female candidates ([Vowles et al, 2017](#)). Neither the National Party nor the Labour Party have adopted formal quotas, but after the introduction of MMP, the Labour Party instituted a so-called 'pause for an equity review' after each bloc of five candidates during the list selection procedure at regional conferences ([McLeay, 2006](#)). While the National Party also applies the principle of balance in its nomination process, it has never mandated strict alternation on its lists.

Dual candidacies (campaigning both for a list and district seat) are permitted in Germany and New Zealand ([Electoral Commission New Zealand, 2012](#); [Manow, 2015](#)). However, while the vast majority of successful candidates in Germany and New

Figure 2: Percentages of 2017 list and district MPs, per party and gender



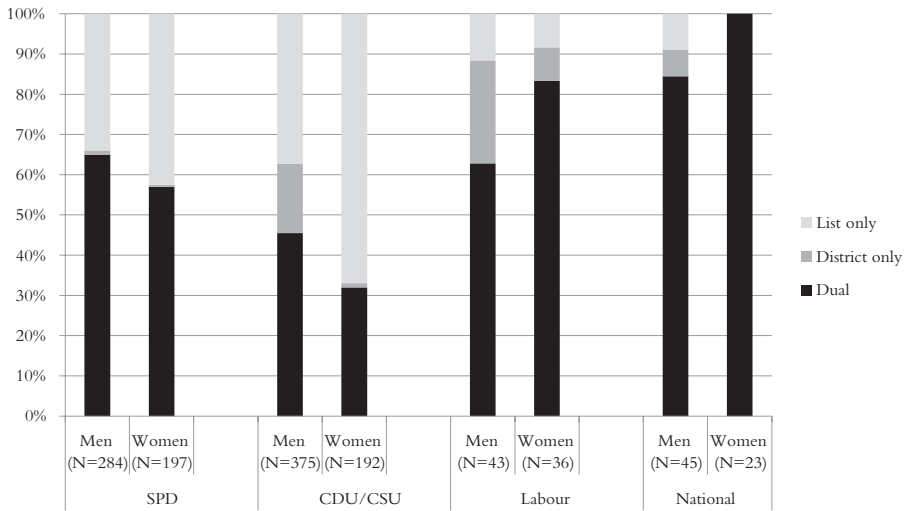
Zealand appear on both portions of the ballot (Reiser, 2011; Siefken, 2013), most do not hold both a promising constituency nomination and a safe list spot.⁶ Those who do are usually leading figures in the party, not newcomers to politics. Thus, strategic aspirants need to decide which type of nomination to initially pursue. After securing a safe list spot or safe district nomination, they are then likely to appear on the other portion of the ballot – but in a less-than-secure position.⁷ For the purposes of our research, the fact that dual candidacies are common will make it more difficult to empirically detect gendered differences in ambition for each tier because aspirants pursuing a nomination in one particular tier may ultimately find themselves appearing on both portions of the ballot. Countries prohibiting dual candidacies, like Mexico, would offer easier tests of our hypotheses because an ambitious person can only be selected for one type of candidacy – likely the one for which they initially decided to develop qualifications.

Female MPs and candidates in the 2017 German and New Zealand elections

Figure 2 presents the proportion of women and men elected as list and district MPs in the 2017 German and New Zealand elections.⁸ It indicates that women were more likely to be elected as list MPs than men for all large parties except the New Zealand National Party, which is also the party paying the least attention to gender in the nomination process of the party list. The data thus suggest that, in particular within parties aiming at bringing diversity to their parliamentary party group, women do, indeed, have a greater likelihood than men to be elected as list MPs rather than district MPs.

Figure 3 expands our analysis to examine all candidates for the 2017 German and New Zealand elections. Here, again, within both the CDU/CSU and SPD, women are more frequently list-only candidates than men, and by extension less often dual or district-only candidates. The pattern is somewhat different for New Zealand, where all female candidates of the National Party were dual candidates in the 2017 elections, while some of the male candidates were district-only or list-only candidates. Within Labour, female candidates are more likely to be dual candidates than their male

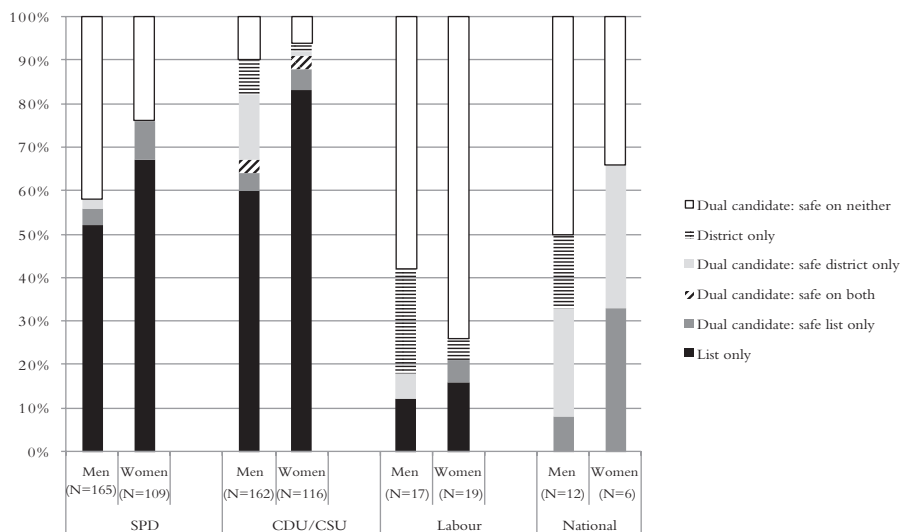
Figure 3: Percentages of 2017 dual, list and district candidates, per party and gender



counterparts. Yet, confirming the pattern observed for German and New Zealand MPs, female Labour candidates are less likely to be district-only candidates than their male candidates.

As our focus is on aspirants attempting to successfully break into national-level politics, we narrow our focus to *new candidates* (defined as candidates who were not on the ballot in the previous national election). A focus on only new candidates helps us to observe how successful aspirants are most likely to make an initial appearance on the ballot, and the fact that they are new candidates helps us to tap into aspirations rather than attempts to secure re-election for party standard-bearers. As can be seen

Figure 4: Percentages of 2017 dual, list and district new candidates, per party and gender



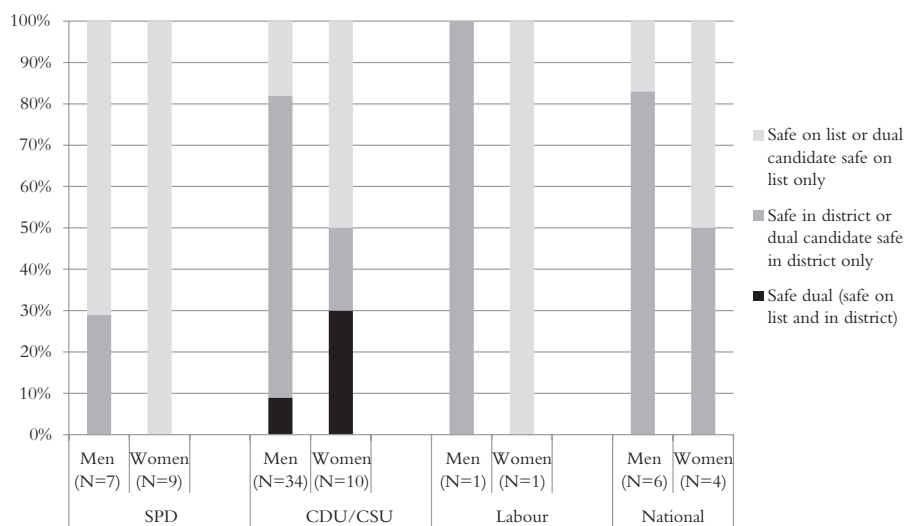
from Figure 4, all main parties in both countries, except the New Zealand National Party, had a higher percentage of new female than male candidates who were list-only candidates. In all parties but the SPD, higher percentages of new male candidates than new female candidates appeared on the district portion of the ballot only.⁹ Among the new candidates who stood in both a district and on the party list (dual candidates), higher percentages of women than men were safe on the list only. In all main parties except the New Zealand National Party, higher percentages of new male dual candidates than new female dual candidates were safe on the district portion of the ballot only. Overall, the data show that when trying to enter Parliament as a first-time candidate, women tend to more often be list-only candidates or dual candidates with a safe list position than are men.

Further narrowing our focus to *new candidates who are safe* on at least one portion of the ballot (party list or district) ensures that only those seriously pursuing elective office are included in our sample.¹⁰ Figure 5 shows that when trying to enter Parliament as a first-time candidate with a safe position or seat, women tend to be more often candidates with a safe list position – whether as a list-only candidate or as a dual candidate – than are men. In all parties, the latter are significantly more likely to campaign in a safe district.

Interviews with German women’s organisations

As suggested earlier in our gendered political ambition model, the patterns of women’s greater likelihood to receive safe nominations and be elected as list MPs may create a self-reinforcing feedback loop and (further) reduce women’s interest in the SMD tier. To offer initial empirical evidence of the four mechanisms suggested in our model, we present data drawn from face-to-face interviews conducted with 22 leaders and staff members of the major German parties’ women’s auxiliary organisations – the Christian Democratic Frauen Union, the Social Democratic Arbeitsgemeinschaft sozialdemokratische Frauen (ASF), the Green’s Landesfrauenrat and the Free

Figure 5: Percentages of 2017 new candidates in safe positions, per party and gender



Democrat's Liberalen Frauen – as well as heads of non-partisan, state-level women's umbrella organisations (*Landesfrauenräte*).¹¹ These organisations work to identify and promote female candidates for elective offices (Davidson-Schmich, 2016). Interviews took place in a range of Western German settings, which were selected to achieve variance on geographic location, the dominant political party, economic development, population density and dominant religion (for further details, see Appendix 1); all interviewees were women.

Leaders were asked an open-ended question about their experiences recruiting women to run for office. The interviewer began by summarising Lawless and Fox's (2010) finding that American women are less likely to express interest in running for elective office than similarly placed men. Interviewees were then asked whether, in their experience, they thought the situation in Germany was similar and, if so, why women hesitated to run for office and whether the different tiers of the electoral system shaped their considerations.

None of the interviewees disputed the premise of the question that women were more often reluctant to come forward as candidates. Some answers to the question did not take gender into account, for example, when members of small parties noted that few people in their ranks, men or women, aspired to directly elected seats that their party was highly unlikely to ever win. Other responses were gendered but not related to the electoral system, such as those noting that it was difficult for mothers of young children to pursue a nomination for either tier. Nonetheless, nine of the 22 interviewees did make comments that identified one tier of the electoral system as more attractive to women than the other. All but one of these interviewees indicated that the list was the better option for women. The one exception was a woman from the CDU's Frauen Union who gave an ambiguous response, detailed later. Demand-side mechanisms were mentioned more frequently than supply-side ones.

The most frequent mechanism – identified by five of the nine interviewees making a connection between gender, ambition and the electoral system tiers – was *gatekeeper bias* in selecting candidates for directly elected seats. As one CDU member argued:

“Women have the problem that they haven't yet been able to build up networks as well as men.... When somewhere people are campaigning for a direct seat nomination, then you have to get a majority to support you so that you are the person who is in first place. And men, because they've learned over the course of hundreds of years how to do this, continue to be better at this than women.”

Interviewed members of the CDU's Frauen Union in Baden Württemberg, where the state legislature is elected through SMD nominations with each district having a backup candidate, noted that they were more successful in getting women nominated as backup candidates than as the main candidate. One interviewee recalled a nominating meeting where the female aspirants, but not the men, were grilled on how they would balance home and childcare responsibilities if elected, and one, a marathon runner, was told she looked too small and skinny to survive the campaign. Several women's auxiliary heads said that potential female nominees often expressed concern that the personalised nature of campaigns for directly elected seats meant that either their physical appearance or their child-rearing practices would come under close scrutiny by party members, voters and the press. Some interviewees advised

women in their party to affiliate with the women's auxiliary in order to secure a safe list position as a specialist on women's affairs, while cautioning their 'protégées' that their sex could be a liability in terms of obtaining a district nomination as older, more conservative voters were reluctant to cast their direct vote for a woman.

Of the interviewees noting a relationship between gender, ambition and the electoral tier, four (of the nine) argued that *diversity mechanisms* made women more ambitious for the list portion of the ballot. Members of the CDU/CSU's, SPD's and Greens' women's auxiliary organisations noted that quotas gave them ammunition to pressure sexist gatekeepers into nominating women for party lists, but that such mechanisms were not present in situations where they tried to argue for female candidates to receive direct nominations. One Social Democratic ASF leader described an incident where her party leaders tried to put together an all-male list, at which point the women's organisation "said we want the quota to be implemented, and we also at the same time suggested a woman.... There were some long faces ... but that's the way it is with us. We have the party statutes on our side [when lists are made]." One young woman elected via party list observed that she was:

"a proponent of the quorum for lists because we have many [men] who have been active in the CDU for years ... and then naturally they also try to get into the Bundestag via district mandates. When someone's been around for a long time, then it's naturally also clear that this person who is also very well known is going to ask to campaign in the district tier."

In turn, she claimed, younger women prefer party lists.

Three of the nine German interviewees identifying a relationship between gender, ambition and the electoral system noted *psychological mechanisms* rendering women more ambitious for the list tier. Interviewees who had run for district seats themselves expressed discomfort with the self-promoting activities required to gain the name recognition needed for a district nomination, describing the process as "uncomfortable", akin to "begging", and lamenting the constant need to appear in the media. Interviews also brought out women's different feelings about the zero-sum competition involved in securing a district candidacy. The head of one state's Social Democratic ASF recalled her initial reluctance to pursue her party's nomination in her district, stating: "I was a little scared of getting into a competition with people [from the party] with whom I was friends." In contrast, the leader of another state's CDU Frauen Union who had pursued a list nomination was more relaxed going into the meeting where the list was to be approved:

"I had been proposed for list place 43, and I thought, 'I don't have anything to lose', so I looked at the other candidates on the list and tried to identify who didn't have a solid footing. And then I challenged one person to get a better spot and I was successful."

Interviewees in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, where the state legislature is elected via SMD, lamented the difficulty in finding women confident enough to pursue district nominations. One Social Democrat observed that "women have very high expectations of themselves.... They ask, 'Can I really do a good job at all aspects of the job from A to Z?', whereas men are easier on themselves and say, 'Things will

take care of themselves.” A member of the CDU’s auxiliary organisation concurred, noting that “Women are too honest. If a man is asked whether he can do a job, he’ll say ‘Yes, sure’ right away, while women actually think through whether they are suited or not and often come to doubt their abilities.” In contrast, in Bremen, a state in which the legislature is elected only through PR lists, leaders of parties’ women’s auxiliary organisations who tried to recruit other women less often mentioned confidence as a hurdle. One female Christian Democratic state legislator there observed that the CDU’s Women’s Union was:

“always of the opinion that women must get ahead by being competent and that’s why we support the women’s quorum for party lists. We say, there’s still many older [men] in the party who, in some cases, have problems doing their job and we have to help them off the list.”

Finally, two of the nine interviewees identifying a relationship between gender, ambition and the electoral tier argued that the activities required to secure a district nomination were at odds with caretaking, the *work–family balance* mechanism. One interviewee discussed the hurdles to developing name recognition in her geographically large district: “Sometimes, there are events that I’d like to go to in the evening, but then I’d have the long drive there and back ... and sometimes you’ve just got to ensure that there’s something in the refrigerator or that maybe the wash gets done.” In contrast, another interviewee, a state-level district MP, who is also a mother of four children and active in her children’s parent-teacher associations, viewed having children as an asset to developing name recognition in her community. However, she also noted that as a mother, she worked more hours than her male counterparts to balance her political and care responsibilities. While her male counterparts coming home late at night had to contend with their spouse nagging that they did not spend enough time with the children, she maintained that she had a nagging partner and, on top of that, “I have to then also go out and buy the children shoes.” This interviewee additionally noted that while new lists are drawn up for each election, in order to obtain a nomination for a safe district seat, an aspirant had to wait for the incumbent to retire or die and then act quickly to secure the seat. As a result, she conceded, women with children can time their pursuit of a safe list spot to correspond with care responsibilities, but not their opportunity for a district nomination.

Conclusions and implications

Starting from the idea that political ambition will be influenced by possibilities and cost–benefit calculations, we developed a model suggesting a gendered cycle of political ambition in mixed electoral systems, introducing four mechanisms explaining why women will be more likely to aspire to a list position than men: work–life balance, psychological, gatekeeper bias and diversity mechanisms. Quantitative data on New Zealand and Germany confirmed women’s greater tendency to campaign and be elected as a list MP than district MP compared with men. Through interviews conducted with German gatekeepers, we find that the four suggested mechanisms are, indeed, occurring there, resulting in women’s greater likelihood to be elected as list MPs and creating a self-reinforcing cycle, with women being more ambitious to win a list than district seat.

Future research can provide greater detail about the gendered cycle model of political ambition in MMP systems. A more detailed and larger collection of interview data would help determine the relative weight and potential interactions of the mechanisms delineated earlier. Since we anticipate context to be important in this regard, with the various mechanisms exerting differing impacts in different national or partisan settings, a cross-national comparison would be very useful. Such research could involve an in-depth investigation both of candidate nomination processes in a number of districts and of party list-making sessions across a given country to determine how the mechanisms outlined earlier shape both aspirants' hopes and gatekeepers' preferences.¹² Large *N* surveys of rank-and-file party members could gauge members' perceptions of the pros and cons to running in each tier and ask specific questions designed to elucidate the mechanisms outlined earlier. Such surveys could also investigate how intersectional identities shape ambition for each tier. Finally, to document the cyclical nature of our model, future research could also take a longitudinal approach.

Overall, our findings indicate that electoral institutions condition the gendered political ambition gap, suggesting that institutional reforms can be developed to promote greater gender equality in the way that MPs are elected in MMP systems. Feminists in Germany have begun calling for quotas to be adopted for the SMD tier of the electoral system (Lau, 2019). As such, institutional changes could result in women's greater representation as district MPs, which could potentially help in breaking the gendered cycle and increase women's interest in the district tier. There seems to be a growing tendency in parties to select women to fill new openings in districts, which, in turn, generates incumbency advantages for the growing number of female district MPs (Fortin-Rittberger and Eder, 2013; Wowles et al, 2017). While longer-term data will have to confirm this pattern, it does suggest that institutional reforms may create (small) cracks in the gendered cycle. Additional policies to increase women's political ambition for the district tier can be developed to address the different mechanisms specified in our model. For example, redefining the expectations of a district MP, or policies such as designated paternity leave encouraging men to do household and care work, could address the work-life balance mechanism. Training programmes for women may be the appropriate policy response to hurdles posed by psychological mechanisms. Implicit bias training for party leaders and sanctions for not promoting women can help overcome the gatekeeper bias mechanism. The diversity mechanism could be corrected by implementing quotas for the district tier. Finally, these steps could help address the gendered cycle that is in place in mixed electoral systems, with women, especially in parties employing affirmative action, facing incentives to aspire to the list tier more often than the district tier.

Cycles are often referred to as 'vicious' or 'virtuous', and feminists may interpret the gendered political ambition cycle that we observe in MMP systems as either one or the other, or (normatively) neutral, depending on the context. In Germany and especially New Zealand, the district tier of the electoral system is perceived as the more powerful one, is more electorally secure and is better compensated (in the case of New Zealand), and district seats are more numerous than list seats. In these cases, that women are less likely than men to aspire to the district tier may be seen as a 'vicious cycle'. However, in other contexts, for example, where the list tier is perceived as being better than or equivalent to the district tier, or when it offers a stepping stone to enter politics, the cycle may be less vicious or even virtuous if it stokes women's ambition to run for at least one tier.

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Notes

- ¹ For an overview of this scholarship, see, for example, [Kenny and Verge \(2016\)](#).
- ² We define ‘ambitious’ individuals as those who are considering how to develop their résumés in order to become an elected official. We term ambitious individuals ‘aspirants’.
- ³ However, this does not mean that leading party figures have not been list MPs. For example, current New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon were elected via the list.
- ⁴ It should be noted that other, non-gendered factors, such as the probability that a candidate from their party would win an SMD, may also shape men’s and women’s ambition for a list or district seat. In the current study, we focus on *gendered* explanatory factors.
- ⁵ In 2017, seven of the 71 districts in New Zealand were dedicated seats for indigenous Māori.
- ⁶ We define safe list positions as being at or above the average of the last elected list position in the last two national elections. Safe districts are defined as districts in which the candidate, or a candidate from the same party, won the district by a margin of at least 10 per cent over the second-placed candidate in the previous election ([Zittel and Gschwend, 2008](#); [Hazan and Rahat, 2010](#)). For more details from the 2017 elections, see later.
- ⁷ Over the course of their careers, MPs may be elected via different tiers. However, this pattern occurs less frequently than MPs being consistently elected via the same tier. [Manow and Flemming’s \(2012: 770\)](#) study of German MPs between 1949 and 2009 identifies 195 people who, over the course of their political career, were elected to the Bundestag from both the list and the PR tier, in contrast to 1,797 people elected through the same tier throughout their career.

- ⁸ Figure 2 and Figure 3 present data for the two main parties in each country (Labour and the National Party in New Zealand and the CDU/CSU and SPD in Germany) since these are the only parties with a meaningful number of both list and district MPs. The smaller parties are generally only successful on the list component of the ballot.
- ⁹ No new National Party candidates were list-only candidates, whereas no new SPD candidates were district-only candidates.
- ¹⁰ In Germany in 2017, 45 per cent of new candidates in 'safe' list positions were ultimately elected and 94 per cent of the *new* candidates campaigning in a (for their party) 'safe' district were elected. In New Zealand in 2017, all new candidates campaigning in a (for their party) 'safe' district were elected whereas only 25 per cent of the candidates on a safe list position were elected. These data also further confirm the greater security offered by campaigning for a (safe) district seat compared with a (safe) list position.
- ¹¹ The interviews were conducted in Western German states where the Left Party did not have well-established women's auxiliaries. The far-right Alternative for Germany does not have a formal women's organisation. While we realise that the number of interviewees is small, we trust that it does allow us to put our model to a first explorative test.
- ¹² For an example of this research design employed in the SMD tier of Germany's MMP system, see Reiser (2011).

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1: List of interviewees

Party	Role
CDU	State-Level Head of Frauen Union
CDU	Former State-Level Head of Frauen Union, State Parliament Speaker for Women's Affairs
CDU	State Parliament Staffer for Women's Affairs
CDU	Member Frauen Union and State Legislator
CDU	County-Level Head of Frauen Union
CDU	Member, Frauen Union
CDU	Member, Frauen Union
FDP	State-Level Head of the Liberalen Frauen
FDP	State Parliament Staffer for Women's Affairs
FDP	Former State-Level Head and State-Level Board Member, Liberalen Frauen
FDP	State Parliament Speaker for Women's Affairs
Greens	Member, Green Landesfrauenrat and State Parliament Speaker for Women's Affairs
Greens	Member of State Legislature
None (affiliated with the CDU)	Board Member, State Landesfrauenrat
None (affiliated with the Greens)	Member, Green Landesfrauenrat and State Parliament Staffer for Women's Affairs
None (affiliated with the SPD)	State Parliament Staffer for Women's Affairs
None (affiliated with the SPD)	Head of State Landesfrauenrat
SPD	Head of State Landesfrauenrat
SPD	Board Member of State Landesfrauenrat and Member ASF
SPD	State-Level Head of the ASF
SPD	Member of ASF, Member of State Legislature
SPD	Vice Chair of the State-Level ASF and State Parliament Speaker for Women's Affairs