

From Politician to Party Leader: How Common is Elected Political Experience Among the Leaders of State Political Parties?*

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Abstract

Using a new dataset developed through an examination of the biographies of all state-level Democratic and Republican party chairs since 2015, this paper finds it is common for state political party chairs to have political experience outside of their respective political parties. Among all 374 state Democratic and Republican party chairs since 2015, 42 percent either have previously, or concurrently, held an elected office beyond that of party chair and another 15 percent of chairs unsuccessfully ran for a non-party elected office prior to being elected chair. It is most common for state party chairs to have gained their experience in elected office at the state level, particularly in the state legislature. When considering the factors correlated with state political parties electing politicians as chair, I find chairs with previous political experience more commonly serve in states with large legislatures, terms limits, and individualistic political cultures. Additionally, I find in comparison to men, women chairs and chairs who have previously served as chair of a local party organization are less likely to have previously held elected office, while non-White chairs are more likely than White chairs to have previously held elected office. Finally, recently elected chairs are more likely to be politicians when compared to less recently elected chairs.

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Introduction

On February 22, 2021, Mike Madigan resigned his position as Chair of the Illinois Democratic Party, a position he had held since 1998. Days before, he had resigned as Illinois House Speaker, which means he had concurrently held the top leadership positions in both the Illinois House of Representatives and the state Democratic party (Meisel 2021). Madigan's next two elected successors as party chair also held elected office while serving as state party chair. First, Robin Kelly, the representative from Illinois's 2nd congressional district in Congress, was elected to serve the remainder of Madigan's term. Then in July 2022, Kelly was replaced as party chair by state representative Elizabeth "Lisa" Hernandez (Cheron 2022). At least in recent history, the Illinois Democratic Party has a strong tradition of placing an elected official in charge of the state party organization. In comparison, from February 2015 to December 2023, J. McCauley "Mac" Brown, who has never held elected political office, served as chair of the Kentucky Republican Party. The party's press release announcing Brown's election as chair noted his business experience, highlighting his role as Vice President of Brown-Forman Corporation, and his involvement in philanthropic organizations in Kentucky (Biagi 2015). In December 2023, when Brown stepped down from his position, he was replaced by former state legislator Robert Benvenuti. Finally, in April 2021, Jessica Velasquez, a small business owner and former educator, was elected chair of the New Mexico Democratic Party. While, at the time, Velasquez had never held elected political office, she had unsuccessfully run for the New Mexico House of Representatives in both 2018 and 2020 (McKay 2021, Democratic Party of New Mexico N.d.).

These recent state political party chairs each have different professional experiences and were involved in party affairs, and political activism more broadly, to varying degrees prior to their election. This suggests there is not a single archetype to describe the political and professional backgrounds of state party leaders. Political scientists have extensively considered the factors related to the formation of political ambition, decisions to run for elected office, and the motivations to become involved in party politics. However, less research has considered how these explanations work together or the extent to which they are connected. For example, how many individuals

become state party chair only after serving in public elected office, or even after running for and failing to win public elected office? Moreover, are there systematic patterns to explain when and where politicians are most likely to be elected state party chair? The goal of this paper is to answer these questions.

First, on the question of frequency, I find it is quite common for state party chairs to have experience in elected office. Among all state Democratic and Republican state party chairs since 2015, 161 out of 374 (about 42 percent) concurrently held, or previously held, an elected office beyond party chair. Another 56 chairs unsuccessfully ran for a non-party elected office prior to being elected chair. Second, when considering whether there are societal, political, or institutional factors which help to explain the distribution of politicians becoming state party leaders across the country, I find several important patterns. In line with expectations, I find it is more common for state party chairs to have previous experience in elected office in states with individualistic political cultures, large legislatures, and legislative terms limits. Contrary to expectations, I find legislative professionalism and state-level partisan competition do not influence which states most commonly elect party chairs with previous elected experience. I also find chairwomen are less likely than chairmen to have previous experience in elected office, which aligns with the fact that women remain underrepresented at most levels of government and which I have been explored further in other work. In comparison, non-White chairs are more likely to have previous elected experience than White chairs and state party chairs who have been elected more recently are more likely to have previously held elected office before becoming chair than chairs who were elected closer to 2015. Finally, chairs who have previously led a local party organization are less likely to have experience in elected office when compared to chairs without local party leadership experience, which again provides evidence of there being multiple career paths to state party leadership positions. Overall, this paper provides a new step in learning more about the career paths of the individuals who lead our state and local political parties, which is an important contribution since these individuals play a leading role in recruiting and supporting candidates, mobilizing voters, and shaping politics more broadly at all levels of government.

Political Ambition in American Politics

Political scientists work with several different conceptualizations of political ambition in American politics. First, Schlesinger (1996) differentiates between discrete ambition, static ambition, and progressive ambition. Discrete political ambition is when a politician wants to hold a specific office for a certain period of time after which they will retire from public life. Static political ambition is when a politician plans to make a long-term career out of holding a specific elected office, but is not necessarily looking for advancement. Finally, progressive political ambition is when a politician wants to advance beyond their current position and hold a higher elected office. These types of political ambition are most commonly discussed in the context of politicians who already hold elected office; and as a result, we can observe the career decisions made by politicians to determine the correlates of each type of political ambition. For example, since members of Congress are described as having the proximate goal of winning reelection (Mayhew 1974), we can assume most members of Congress hold static ambition. However, when members of the House of Representatives or a state legislature run for higher office we can tell that they have progressive ambition. Politicians typically act on progressive ambition when the potential costs of doing so are low (Rohde 1979), such as when a politician's future constituency overlaps with their current constituency (Brace 1984, Carson, Crespin, Eaves & Wanless 2011, Carson, Crespin, Eaves & Wanless 2012). Similarly, when an elected official retires from elected office, we know that at some point they switched from having static to discrete ambition. Among other reasons, politicians most commonly retire when they are concerned about their ability to win reelection, when their ability to influence public policy becomes limited, and when they face scandals (Hibbing 1982, Theriault 1998, Lawless & Theriault 2005, Thomsen 2017, Brant & Overby 2021)

Past scholarship has also invested significant time examining levels of political ambition among the public. Nascent political ambition is when an individual has considered running for elected office, or even plans to run for office one day, but has not yet acted on this ambition (Fox & Lawless 2005, Lawless 2012). While political ambition is associated with certain personality traits (Dynes, Hassell, Miles & Preece 2021), there are wider disparities in who is most likely to hold nascent

political ambition in American politics. For example, in comparison to men, women are less likely to hold political ambition (Lawless & Fox 2010, Fox & Lawless 2024) and in comparison to previous generations, Millennials hold less political ambition (Shames 2017). As is the case with politicians, the potential benefits of holding elected office, as well as the costs associated with running for elected office go a long way in explaining if and when individuals act on nascent political ambition (Lazarus 2008).¹ However, due to varying levels of partisan competition and the fact the size of state and local governments vary across the country, some individuals are presented with more opportunities to run for elected office than are others (Squire 1988, Kazee 1994, Geras 2018). Political parties and other elites can also encourage individuals to run for elected office through their recruitment efforts (Masket 2009, Broockman 2014); although, these practices may also reinforce the uneven levels of political ambition seen in the American politics (Niven 1998, Crowder-Meyer 2013, Butler & Preece 2016). Finally, real and perceived biases held by the electorate, and society as a whole, can also influence someone's political ambition (Holman & Schneider 2018, Saha & Weeks 2022, Bos, Greenlee, Holman, Oxley & Lay 2022).

The Motivations of Political Activists

While some political activists, which includes the members of state and local political party committees, hope to some day hold elected office, the motives of political activists go beyond political ambition. For example, one survey finds only about 13.5 percent of local political party chairs are motivated by their desire to have a political career of their own (Roscoe & Jenkins 2021). Political activists are motivated by a collection of goals including self enhancement, building social connections, purposive benefits, partisan loyalty, and loyalty to individuals candidates (Clark & Wilson 1961, Costantini & King 1984). Of these explanations, Roscoe and Jenkins (2021) find most local party activists are amateurs, opposed to party professionals, and are mostly motivated by political and ideological goals such as negative partisanship and policy concerns. This aligns

¹It is worth noting some non-experienced candidates act more strategically than others (Kazee 1980, Canon 1990).

with the view of parties as networks of policy demanders who try to achieve their goals by shaping party nominations (Cohen, Karol, Noel & Zaller 2008, Bawn, Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel & Zaller 2012, Hassell 2018, Noel 2018).

Which Factors Explain the Presence of State Party Chairs with Electoral Experience?

The goal of this paper is to begin the process of evaluating how, if at all, the position of state political party chair fits into the career trajectory of the politically ambitious. Specifically, I evaluate how common is it for state party chairs to have previously held, or at least run for, elected office. Additionally, I consider whether there are societal, political, or institutional factors that make it more likely for some state political parties to elect politicians as their chairs than others. While there may be other factors that correlate with the likelihood of a state political party electing a chair with previous experience in elected office, in this paper, I consider five factors which have previously been found to influence the career decisions of politicians for other elected offices in American politics. Two of these factors are societal or political in nature in the sense that they relate to the norms and history of a location, but are not official rules or laws. These are the degree of partisan competition in a state and each state's political culture, which speaks to who is expected to hold political power. The other three factors are institutional since they are spelled out in state law. These include the size of a state's legislature, a state legislature's degree of legislative professionalism, and the presence or absence of legislative term limits. The existing literature on political ambition and the motivations of political activists inform the theoretical explanations as to why these factors may influence the likelihood of experienced politicians viewing the position of state party chair as a desirable as well as why political activists in some states may look toward politicians when electing their chairs more frequently than others.

Partisan Electoral Competition

Since individuals are typically more likely to run for elected office when they think they can win (Maisel & Stone 2014) a party's strength in a given constituency goes along way in explaining who runs for and ultimately wins elected office. At the state level, two-party competition is often rare. Instead, it is more common for one political party to hold most, if not all, of the positions of state-wide political power. For example, following the 2022 midterm elections, only 10 states had divided government, while in the remaining 40 states one party was in control of the governorship and the state legislature (Greenberger 2023).

In states where one political party holds the vast majority of power, members of that party will view holding elected office as more desirable. Moreover, since state and local political parties play an important role in recruiting, supporting, and advising candidates, mobilizing voters, and shaping party goals more broadly, including in some cases gatekeeping to maintain those goals (Kolodny & Dulio 2003, Brox 2004, Hassell 2018, Doherty, Dowling & Miller 2022, Hannah, Reuning & Whitesell 2022), holding party office, particularly the position of state chair should also be more desirable. In general, this would mean more people would be interested in holding the position of party chair, but there are several reasons to suspect individuals with previous political experience might be particularly likely to win these positions. First, if there is more competition for the office of state party chair, we would expect candidates with previous electoral experience would be advantaged in these elections due to name recognition, campaign experience, existing connections to important players in the party organization, etc., as is the case in other elections (Jacobson 1989, Carson, Engstrom & Roberts 2007). Second, an argument can be made that political parties operating in states where they are powerful would be more visible, which would make the position of party chair a more prestigious office to hold. As a visible and prestigious position, it seems reasonable to expect the explanations for whom is most likely to be interested in holding this position, might more closely align with other elected offices, at least in comparison to less visible political parties. In this sense, running for and winning the position of party chair may require political ambition in addition to, or even opposed to, the other types of incentives

that motivate party activists more generally. In fact, if these position are more visible, politically ambitious individuals, including those who have already held some other type of elected office, may even view the position of state party chair as a steppingstone from which they can act on progressive ambition. For all of these reasons, it seems like individuals with previous political experience would be more likely to hold the position of state political party chair in states where their party is successful.

However, there is also an argument to be made that experienced politicians might be more likely to lead state parties in circumstances where their party has been historically less successful. When one political party holds a significant electoral advantage over the other party, it seems likely experienced leadership is less important in the dominant party. This is because managing a dominant political party is likely easier than managing a political party working from behind. For example, in their examination of local political parties, Doherty et al. (2022) find in places where one political party dominates, active candidate recruitment is less necessary because with a partisan electoral advantage, most elections featured a party incumbent seeking reelection and when an open seat became available, multiple candidates would emerge without much active recruitment from the party. Similarly, they find increased local party activity can actually harm a political party's federal candidates in counties where the political party receives more than 55 percent of the previous presidential vote (Doherty, Dowling & Miller 2021). This is a finding supported in other research. Specifically, Jenkins and Roscoe (2014) find local political parties have the greatest influence on national elections in areas where there is two-party competition or where a political party is electorally disadvantaged. While dominant political parties cannot become complacent, it is clear these parties need to play less active roles in elections. For this reason, party members likely value previous political experience less when they are electing their leaders. Second, when considering the number of political opportunities for career advancement available to experienced politicians, an argument might be made that progressive ambition would more likely lead an experienced politician to party office in states where the party is disadvantaged. In states where one political party is dominant, the party's experienced candidates have a chance of winning many

elected offices. For this reason they may not run for state party chair and instead run for a more public elected office. In comparison, in states where a political party is electorally disadvantaged, the number of opportunities for career advancement are significantly smaller since the party will be less competitive in races for most elected offices. As a result individuals may need to rely on party offices when acting on progressive ambition. This would make state party chairs with previous electoral experience more common in states where a party is electorally disadvantaged.

Since there are arguments to be made that a political party's electoral success might have either a positive or negative correlation with that party valuing politically experienced leadership in the position of state party chair, I consider the following two competing hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair when their state political party operates in an electorally favorable environment.*

Hypothesis 2 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair when their state political party operates in an electorally unfavorable environment.*

State Political Culture

In addition to a state's partisanship, another social and political factor which may influence the degree to which a state political party might value the experience of politicians when electing their chairs is the state's political culture. In his seminal work on political culture, Elazar (1984) describes political culture as society's orientation towards political action based on its embedded political system. He identifies states as belonging to one of three political cultures, moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. States with a moralistic political culture, consider politics to be of concern for all citizens and moralistic states typically value government intervention. States with an individualistic political culture consider politics to be a necessary but dirty endeavor. This means politics is viewed similar to an economic marketplace and limited intervention is desirable. Finally, states with a traditionalistic political culture tend to have more hierarchical societies with political power being held by a more limited number of people. Since state political culture speaks

to how a society views government and who should become involved in politics, it seems likely to influence who is elected to lead a state's political party organizations. Since moralistic societies tend to have a more inclusive view of political participation when compared to traditionalistic or individualistic societies, political parties in moralistic states will likely be able to rely on activists with a broader array of experiences and thus less reliant on politicians when electing their party leaders. In comparison, since traditionalistic and individualistic societies tend to see smaller groups of citizens involved in politics, political parties in these states are probably more reliant on politicians when electing their leaders. As a result, I test the following two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair in states with a traditionalistic political culture compared to a moralistic political culture.*

Hypothesis 4 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair in states with an individualistic political culture compared to a moralistic political culture.*

State Legislature Size

Beyond societal and political considerations, variations in the institutional designs of state government also likely play a role in explaining which state parties are most likely to be led by politicians. An obvious element of institutional design which influences the number of politicians present in a state as well as the number of political opportunities for which these politicians compete is the size of government. Of particular concern in state politics is the size of each state's legislature. While there is some variation in whether state constitutional officers like treasurer or secretary of state are elected or appointed, most states generally have a similar number of statewide politicians. However, state legislatures vary greatly in size. At the low end, Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Hawaii, Nebraska, Nevada, Oregon, and Wyoming each have fewer than 100 state legislators. In comparison, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania each have more than 200 state legislators. Since state legislatures vary in the extent to which they are professionalized, which I speak to more thoroughly in the next section, it

seems likely that states with more politicians are more likely to see their political parties led by a politician than someone without experience in elected office. State with large legislatures require a greater number of elected officials, but once they leave the state legislature, if these politicians want to continue their political careers, they will face more competition for a more limited number of opportunities. Therefore it is more likely that some politicians will shift their focus toward party office. Overall, based on this logical and the larger literature on how the number of political opportunities available in a given constituency shapes the political ambitions of its prospective officeholders (Squire 1988, Kazee 1994, Geras 2018), I evaluate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 5 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair in states with large state legislatures.*

Legislative Professionalism

Legislative professionalism measures the capacity of a state legislature, typically with a comparison to Congress in mind. Measures of legislative professionalism often rely on considerations such as how often a legislature is in session, a legislature's staffing resources, and legislator pay (Mooney 1994, Squire 2007, Bowen & Greene 2014).

Past research finds a complicated relationship between legislative professionalism and state legislators acting on progressive political ambition (See Panagopoulos 2021). On one hand, legislators serving in highly professional legislatures are uniquely qualified to run for and win other elected offices due to their past experiences and the resources, such as PAC support, associated with these past experiences (Berkman & Eisenstein 1999). Similarly, legislators serving in highly professionalized legislatures are more likely to be recruited to run for higher office (Maestas, Maisel & Stone 2005). On the other hand, in comparison to less professionalized legislatures, highly professionalized legislatures make for a better working environment which often makes long-term service more likely (Squire 1988, Maestas, Fulton, Maisel & Stone 2006). In this sense, as legislative professionalism increases, state legislators may be more likely to pursue static political ambition opposed to progressive or discrete political ambition. Overall, this suggests state legis-

lators, who according to this analysis appear to be the group of politicians most likely to move onto the position of state political party chair, might be more interested in the position of state party chair when they serve in less professionalized legislatures. However, legislators who serve in more professionalized legislatures are likely to be more successful if they do decide to run for party leadership. Since there are reasons to expect politicians will view the position of state party chair as being more desirable in less professionalized states, but there are also reasons to expect that politicians will be more likely to win the position of state party chair if they do run for it, I will once again consider two competing hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair in states with low levels of legislative professionalism.*

Hypothesis 7 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair in states with high levels of legislative professionalism.*

Term Limits

Finally, of all the societal, political, and institutional factors under consideration in this paper, terms limits should have the most straightforward impact on the likelihood of a state political party electing a state chair with previous political experience. Specifically, we should expect to see a greater number of state political party chairs with previous political experience in states with term limits in comparison to states without term limits. The reason for this is clear. While evidence of many of the other predicted effects of term limits, such as increased electoral competition and diversified state legislatures, appears limited, term limits by definition, do create more turn over in state government (Kousser 2008, Butcher 2023). Moreover when politicians are forced to leave their position within a state legislature, this does not mean they no longer hold political ambition. On average, term limits do not appear to explain the variation in the number of quality candidates running for Congress over time (Panagopoulos 2021), but evidence suggests term limits may only influence political behavior when they would immediately affect a state legislator's career decisions (Steen 2006). Moreover, not every politician who faces term limits may be interested in a career in

Congress. Some may instead opt for another state or local office, including that of state political party chair. As a result, the final hypotheses that will be consider in this paper is as follows.

Hypothesis 8 *Individuals who have previously held elected office will more commonly hold the position of state party chair in states with term limits.*

Data and Methodology

In order to determine the frequency by which experienced politicians hold the position of state political party chair and determine whether these patterns are explained by the societal, political, and institutional factors just discussed, it is necessary to collect data on the backgrounds of state political party chairs over time. I collected biographical data on all Democratic and Republican state political party chairs since 2015, for a total of 374 state chairs, from a variety of different sources.² To begin, I relied on any biographies of the current or past state party chairs found on each state party's website. Unfortunately, not every state political party provided biographies of their leaders on their websites and even when they did, I did not rely on this information alone. I also relied on national and local news stories written about each party leader, particularly stories written to announce the election of a new party leader or when a party chair stepped down, and other online sources such as profiles on Ballotpedia, LinkedIn, and Wikipedia. When researching each chair, I relied on multiple sources of information and my data collection procedures were build around the ideal of triangulation.

Using these sources, I created several difference measure of experience. First, to measure overall experience in non-party elected office, I differentiate between state political party chairs who 1) never held non-party elected office, 2) never held non-party elected office, but who ran unsuccessfully for office, 3) previously held non-party elected office, and 4) held non-party elected office, while concurrently serving as state party chair. Second, to see which types of elected offices

²State parties have different procedures for handling leadership vacancies. In my dataset, I do not include individuals who served as interim chair if they automatically took over the duties of chair, but only for a few weeks or even days until a new chair is elected. However, I do include interim chairs who were explicitly elected to finish the terms of their predecessors since these individuals normally served as chair for more than a few weeks of months.

state chairs most commonly held, I create three binary variables that ask whether or not a chair has experience in non-party local elected office, such as city council or town trustee, non-party state elected office, such as state legislator, and non-party federal elected office, such as Congress.

For each of these measures of experience in elected office, I do not count being elected to a party-level office, such as state central committee member or vice chair of the state party. This is for two reasons. First these experiences are much more common for the chairs of state political parties than is being elected to a non-party office. Most state party chairs are elected from within the state central committee and some state political parties even grant ex-officio membership to some groups of elected officials (Geras 2022). Second, these elections are often less visible, with much smaller and more partisan electorates, which means the individuals winning these positions do not necessary have the same experience as individuals who win a an election for school board, city council, state legislature, etc..

Beyond experience in non-party elected office, I also consider whether state party chairs have three other forms of political experience. These are whether they served as chair of a local-level political party, most commonly a county-level political party, whether each chair had previously served as vice chair of the state state organization, and whether the chair had previously served as a political or campaign staffer, which includes things like working as a staffer for the state legislature or as a campaign staffer for any level of government, but does not include working for a campaign in their role within the political party. These are all binary measures.

One drawback of this data collection approach is I can never be certain I did not miss a resource that would have informed my coding or that the resources I did read might have failed to report pieces of information important to this project. Of most importance to this project is whether each party leader has previous elected experience at different levels of government. Since these sources of information primarily discussed elected experience when the individual in question had previous elected experience, my coding process assigns the code of no previous political experience if I did not find a resource stating this individual had previous elected experience. This means I can never fully confirm a lack of previous political experience because it was exceedingly rare for news

articles and leader profiles to explicitly mention a party leader did not have previous electoral experience. I tried my best to mitigate this concern by continuing to read news articles about each party leader until I either found evidence they had previously held elected office or until the resources I was consulting stopped offering new information about the leader. Additionally, it is worth mentioning when a party leader did have previous elected experience, I normally found evidence of this almost immediately since having previous elected experience is likely something leaders wanted to advertise in their biographies. Additionally, this is also information media sources deemed important to convey in their reporting. An alternative approach to data collection would have been to survey state party leaders. I opted against this approach since elite surveys often suffer from non-response bias. While the survey approach has been successful in studies focused on county party leaders (Crowder-Meyer 2013, Roscoe & Jenkins 2016, Broockman, Carnes, Crowder-Meyer & Skovron 2021, Doherty, Dowling & Miller 2022), the potential for non-response bias possess a larger threat for the exploration of state party leaders since there are only 100 state-level Democratic and Republican parties.

To measure partisan electoral competition, I calculate the two-party, state-level presidential vote in the presidential election preceding each chairs election and the two-party, state-level gubernatorial vote in the gubernatorial election preceding each chair's election. For example, I would use the 2016 presidential election results for chairs elected in 2017, 2018, or 2019, but would use the 2020 presidential election results for chairs elected in 2021. I collect each presidential candidates' state-level voteshare from the American Presidency Project and the results of gubernatorial elections from Ballotpedia. When looking at partisan competition in each state, I collapse these continuous measures to differentiate between parties who operate at a partisan disadvantage, which means they obtained less than 45 percent of the vote in the previous election, parties who operate in a competitive environment, which means they obtained between 45 and 55 percent of the vote in the last election, and parties who operate in at a partisan advantage, which means they obtained more than 55 percent of the vote in the last election. This classification scheme aligns with previous work on the electoral impacts of local party activities (Doherty, Dowling & Miller 2021).

I identify each state's political culture according to Elazar's conceptualization in *The American Mosaic: The Impact of Space, Time, and Culture on American Politics* (Elazar 1994). The size of each state legislature is a continuous measure and is tracked by Ballotpedia. To measure legislative professionalism, I rely on the National Conference of State Legislatures' differentiation of part-time, full-time, and hybrid state legislatures (National Conference of State Legislatures 2021) as a categorical measure. Finally, I create a binary measure of whether or not a state has term limits in place according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (National Conference of State Legislatures 2020).³

Beyond the independent variables necessary to test my hypotheses, I control for several characteristics of each state party chair or party which might influence whether the chair might have experience in non-party elected office. First, I have binary variables to measure whether or not each chair is a woman and whether or not each chair is not White, since gender and racial biases might come into play during these less public partisan elections. I also control for the year each chair was elected to see if there are temporal differences regarding the frequency by which individuals with elected experiences are elected to state party chair. At the chair-level, I also control for whether each chair previously served as vice chair of the state party organization and whether each chair previously served as chair of a local party organization. Finally, at the party-level, Democratic Party is a binary variable that differentiates between Democratic and Republican Parties and I use Mayhew's (1986) five-point ranking of traditional partisan organizations to control for state party strength and organizational capacity.

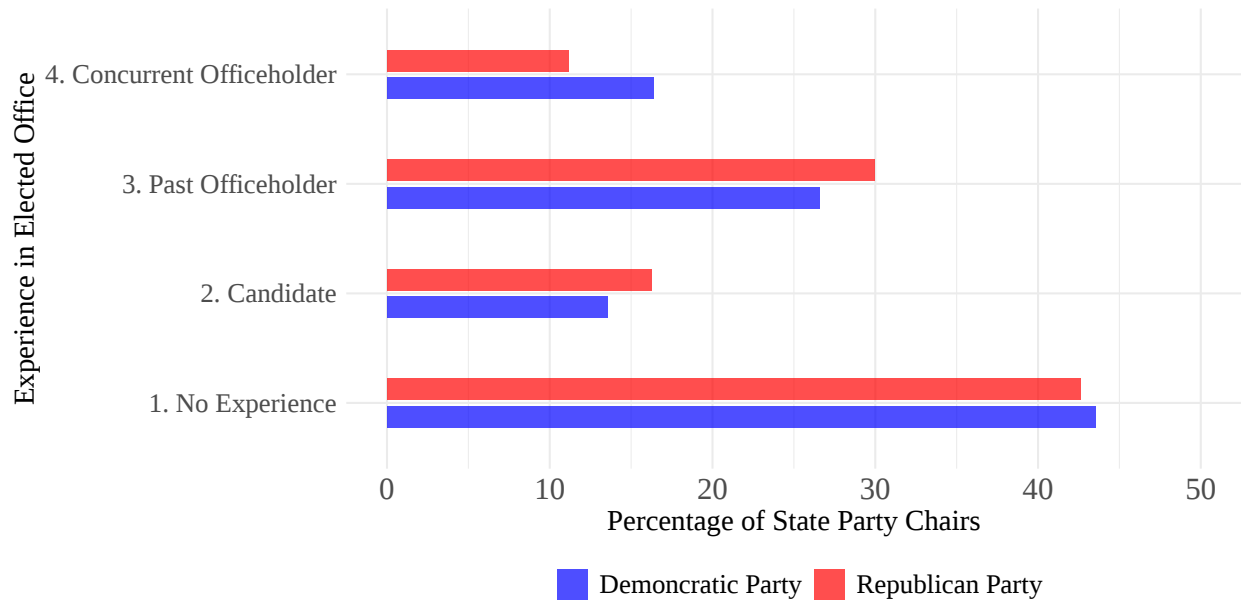


Figure 1: Elected Political Experience of State Party Chairs

Note: This figure displays the percentage of state political party chairs who have 1. no previous experience in elected office, 2. no previous experience in elected office, but who have run for elected office, 3. previously held elected office, and 4. concurrently held elected office in addition to serving as state party chair. Democratic n = 177; Republican n = 197.

Findings

How Common is Political Experience Among State Political Party Chairs?

Before considering which societal, political, and institutional factors correlate with the election of state political party chairs with experience in public elected office, it is first necessary to take a descriptive look at how common it is for state political party chairs to have experience in public elected office. Figure 1 displays the percentage of state political party chairs with experience in non-political party elected office. Specifically, it differentiates between chairs who have no experience in elected office, chairs who have no experience in elected office, but who have unsuccessfully run for elected office, chairs who have previously held elected office, and chairs who held elected

³North Dakota adopted legislative term limits in 2022 with them taking effect in 2022 for the state house and 2023 for the state senate. Therefore, I code any North Dakota chair elected in 2023 or earlier as being elected from a state without term limits. No other state changed their legislative term limit policies over the course of time examined in my dataset.

office, while concurrently serving as state party chair. These results are broken down by political party. A majority of both state Democratic and state Republican party chairs have never held elected office and there does not appear to be major differences between the parties. About 59 percent of state Republican party chairs (116 of 197) have never held elected office outside of political party office, but among these individuals, about a quarter of them (32 out of 116) have unsuccessfully run for elected office in the past. Among Democratic state party chairs, about 58 percent (101 of 177) have never held elected office outside of party office and again, about a quarter of these chairs (24 of 101) have previously run for elected office unsuccessfully, which means at least at one time, they possessed political ambition and acted on that political ambition. J. McCauley Brown and Jessica Valesquez, both of whom were highlighted in the introduction, are examples of chairs who fall into these first two categories of party leaders who have never held elected office outside of the party, with Valesquez having previously run for elected office. Of the state party chairs with experience holding elected office outside of their political party, 47 Democratic chairs, about 62 percent, previously held office and 29 Democratic chairs, about 38 percent concurrently held non-party elected office while also serving as state party chair. While a slightly greater percentage of Republican state party chairs have experience in elected office, it is less common for Republican party chairs to hold another elected office while concurrently serving as party chair. In fact, only 22 of the 81 Republican chairs with experience in elected office concurrently held the position of chair and a non-party elected office. This means the remaining 59 Republican party chairs held elected office prior to becoming chair.⁴ In total, among Republican chairs, about 43 percent had no political experience and had not run for elected office previously, 16 percent had no political experience, but had run for elected office, 30 percent previously held elected office, and 11 percent concurrently held elected office. Among Democratic chairs, about 44 percent had no political experience and had not run for elected office, 14 percent had no political experience, but

⁴Whether a state political party chair is allowed to concurrently hold another elected office is in some cases regulated by the party's bylaws. Additionally, even when there is no formal rule against a state chair holding elected office, in some states there appears to be a norm against doing so. While collecting data, I saw multiple examples of chairs being criticized for either running for an elected office while serving as chair or considering running for another office while chair.

had run for elected office, 27 percent previously held elected office, and 16 percent concurrently held elected office. Overall, this data suggests state party chairs are more likely than local party chairs to have experience in a non-party elected office. Past surveys find only about a third of local political party chairs had previous political experience (Roscoe & Jenkins 2021, Doherty, Dowling & Miller 2022).

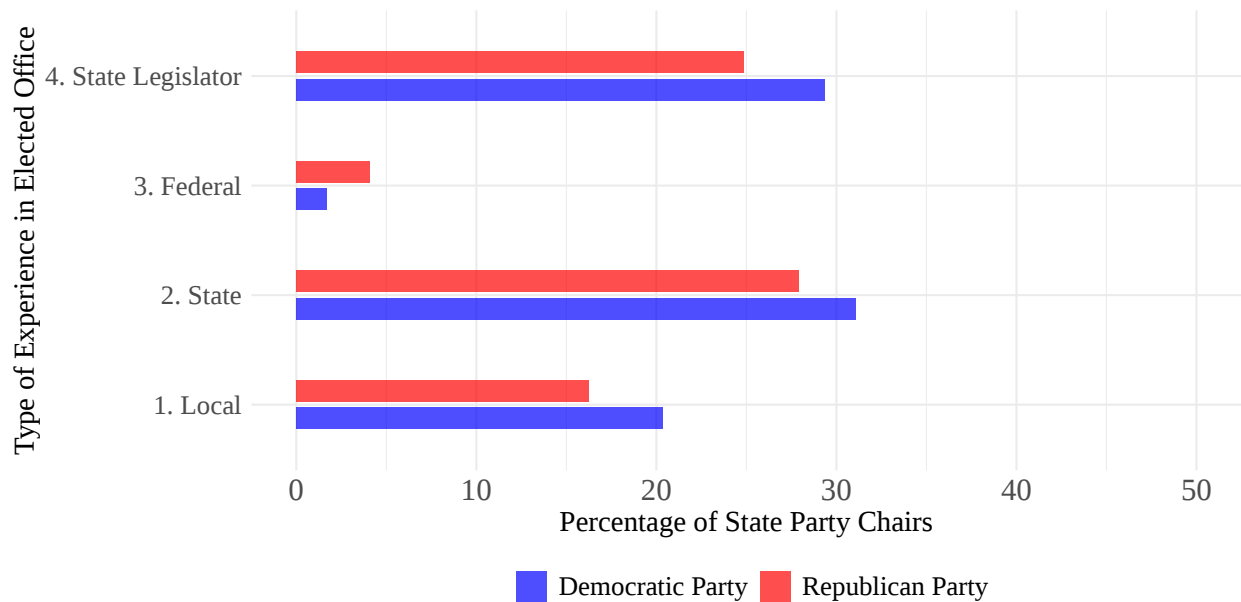


Figure 2: Type of Experience in Elected Office

Note: This figure displays the percentage of state political party chairs who have at some point served in 1. local elected office, 2. state elected office, 3. federal elected office, 4. a state legislature. Categories are not mutually exclusive since some chairs held elected office at multiple levels of government. Democratic n = 177; Republican n = 197.

Figure 2 examines which types of non-party elected office state party chairs have most commonly held. Specifically, it displays the percentage of state party chairs who have held local-level, state-level, and federal-level elected office. These categories are not mutually exclusive since a state party chair could have served in elected office at more than one level of government. Additionally, this graph does not distinguish between chairs who concurrently held office from those who previously held elected office. Only 11 state party chairs, 8 Republicans, about 4 percent, and 3 Democrats, about 2 percent, have held federal-elected office. It is much more common for state

political party chairs to have either held local or state-level elected office. Specifically, 55 Republican chairs, about 28 percent, have held state-level elected office and 32 Republican chairs, about 16 percent, have held local-level elected office. In comparison, 55 Democrat chairs, about 31 percent, have held state-level elected office and 36 Democratic chairs, about 20 percent, have held local-level elected office. Overall, it is most common for state political party chairs to have gained their elected experience in their respective state legislature, which is also displayed in Figure 2. Across the entire sample of state party chairs, 101 have served as a state legislator with a pretty even split between the parties. Among Democratic party chairs, 52, or about 29 percent, served in a state legislature and among Republican party chairs 49, or about 25 percent, have served in a state legislature.

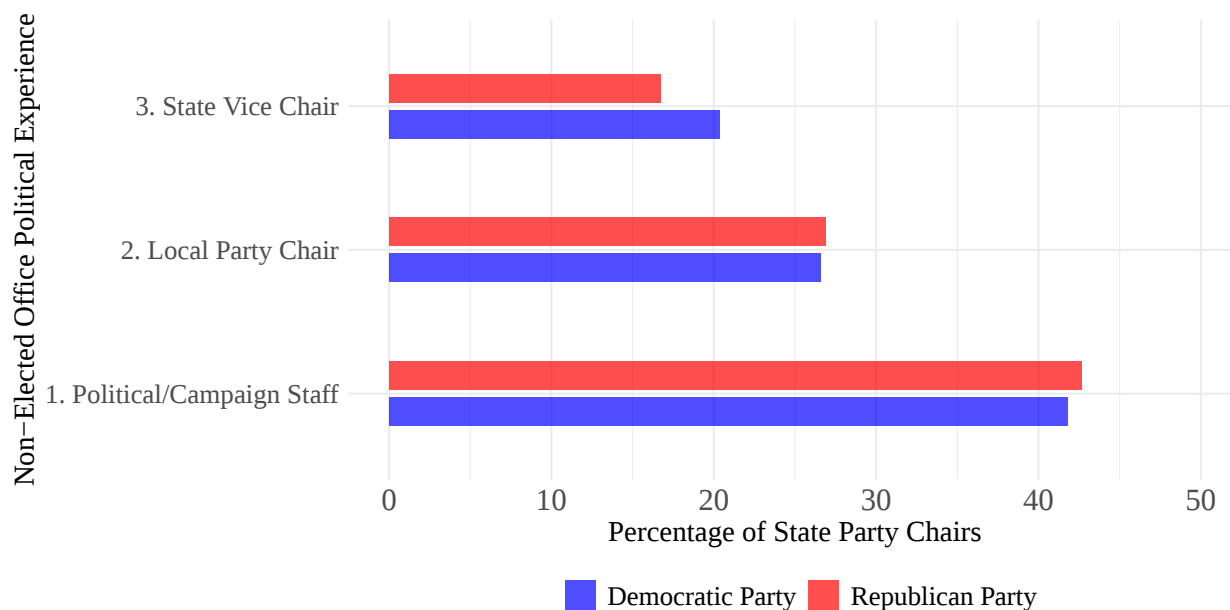


Figure 3: Non-Elected Political Experience of State Party Chairs

Note: This figure displays the percentage of state political party chairs who have at some point served as 1. political or campaign staff, not including party work, 2. the chair of a local political party, and 3. the vice chair of the state party organization. Democratic n = 177; Republican n = 197.

While the focus of this paper is on the extent to which state political party chairs have experience in elected office, this is not the only type of political experience state party chairs may possess. Figure 3 displays the percentage of state party chairs who have three non-elected forms of

political experience, serving as a political or campaign staffer, serving as the chair of a local-level, most commonly county-level, political party, and serving as vice chair of the state party organization. In comparison to 47 Democratic chairs, about 27 percent, 53 Republican chairs, also about 27 percent, served as chair of a local-level party committee. This is an interesting finding because at the local-level, Democratic chairs are less likely to serve in other party leadership positions before becoming chair (Doherty, Dowling & Miller 2022). However, Democratic chairs (36, about 20 percent) were more likely than Republican chairs (33, about 17 percent) to previously serve as vice chair of the state political party. Regarding work as a political or campaign staffer, 84 Republicans, about 43 percent, and 74 Democrats, about 42 percent, have this type of experience. Overall, when it comes to political experience outside of elected office, Republican and Democratic chairs appear similar.

What Correlates with the Selection of Party Chairs with Political Experience?

I use logistic regression to test my hypotheses since my dependent variable is a binary measure of whether each state party chair has experience in elective office, either prior to being elected chair or concurrently while holding the position of chair. Each independent and control variable is coded as described in the methodology section. Figure 4 displays the effect of each coefficient on the dependent variable along with each estimates corresponding 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 offering competing predictions as to whether state political parties would more commonly elect chairs with experience in elected office when they operate at either a partisan advantage or partisan disadvantage. Despite there being theoretical arguments underlying both hypotheses, neither hypothesis is supported by this analysis. First when measuring partisan competition using the state-level presidential vote, parties operating in an area where both parties are competitive and parties operating in an area of partisan advantage are not more likely to elect chairs with previous experience in elected office. The same is true when measuring partisan competition using the state-level gubernatorial vote. Here, both the coefficient for 2-party com-

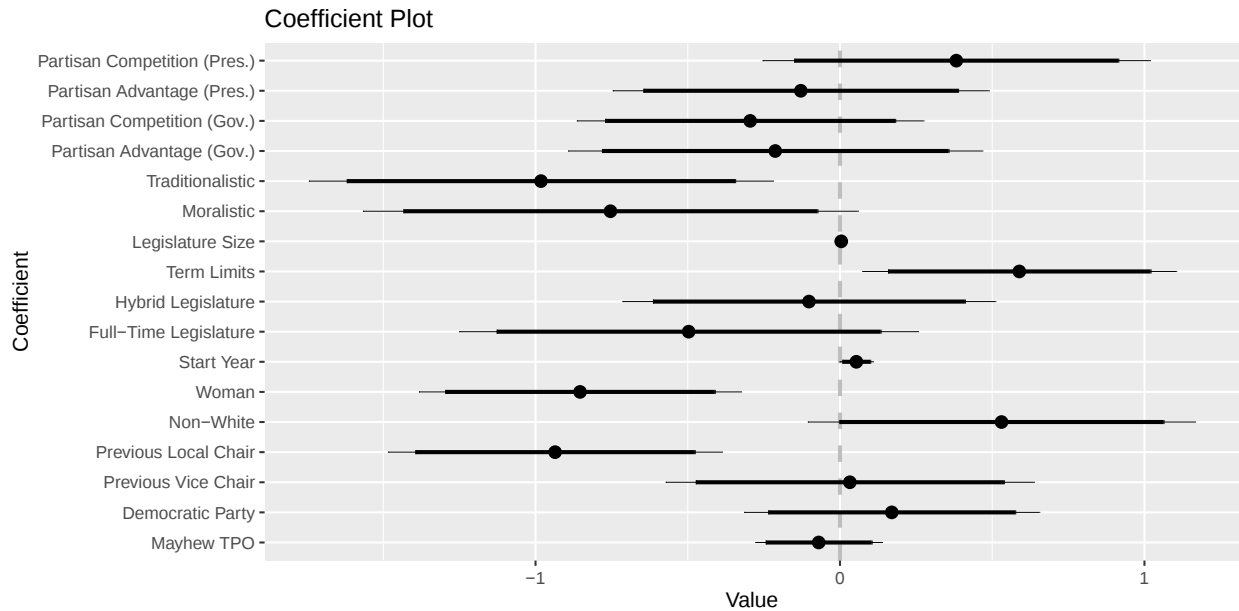


Figure 4: Logistic Regression Estimating Chairs with Experience in Elected Office

Note: This figure displays the results of a logistic regression model estimating which factors correlate with state party chairs having experience in elected office. The reference category for political competition is partisan disadvantage for presidential and gubernatorial elections respectively. The reference category for political culture is individualistic. The reference category for NCSL's classification of legislatures is part-time legislature. $n = 374$

petition and the coefficient for partisan advantage are negative, but neither is statically significant. When consider the influence of political culture, Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted traditionalistic and individualistic states respectively would more commonly elect politicians to the position of state party chair when compared to moralistic states. Here, Hypothesis 4, but not hypothesis 3 is supported. Since individualistic is the reference category and both the coefficients for traditionalistic and moralistic states are negative and statistically significant, we can conclude that traditionalistic states most commonly elects chairs with experience in elected office, but there is not a significant difference between moralistic and traditionalistic states. Moralistic states tend to have a more inclusive view of who should participate in politics than either traditionalistic and individualistic states, so the finding that moralistic and traditionalistic states are similar in this regard is surprising.

Turning now to institutional factors, in support of Hypothesis 5, I find a states with larger state legislature more commonly elected chairs with experience in public elected office. The coefficient

for legislature size, 0.004, while small is significant at $p = 0.1$. Similarly, in support for Hypothesis 8, I find states with legislative terms limits are more likely to elect chair with experience in non-party elected office than states without term limits. This is likely because term limits complicate the career paths of politicians serving in these states. While term limits create more turnover in state legislatures, they do not tend to increase electoral competition or reduce political ambitions (Kousser 2008). Collectively, both of these findings align with previous research that argues the opportunity structure in each electorate plays an important role in shape which individuals hold and ultimately act on political ambition. Finally, when evaluating the competing hypotheses (H6 and H7) about the role of state legislative professionalism, I again find no support for either hypothesis. In comparison to part-time legislatures, the coefficient for both hybrid and full time legislatures are negative, which might suggest support for Hypothesis 6, but neither coefficient is statistically significant.

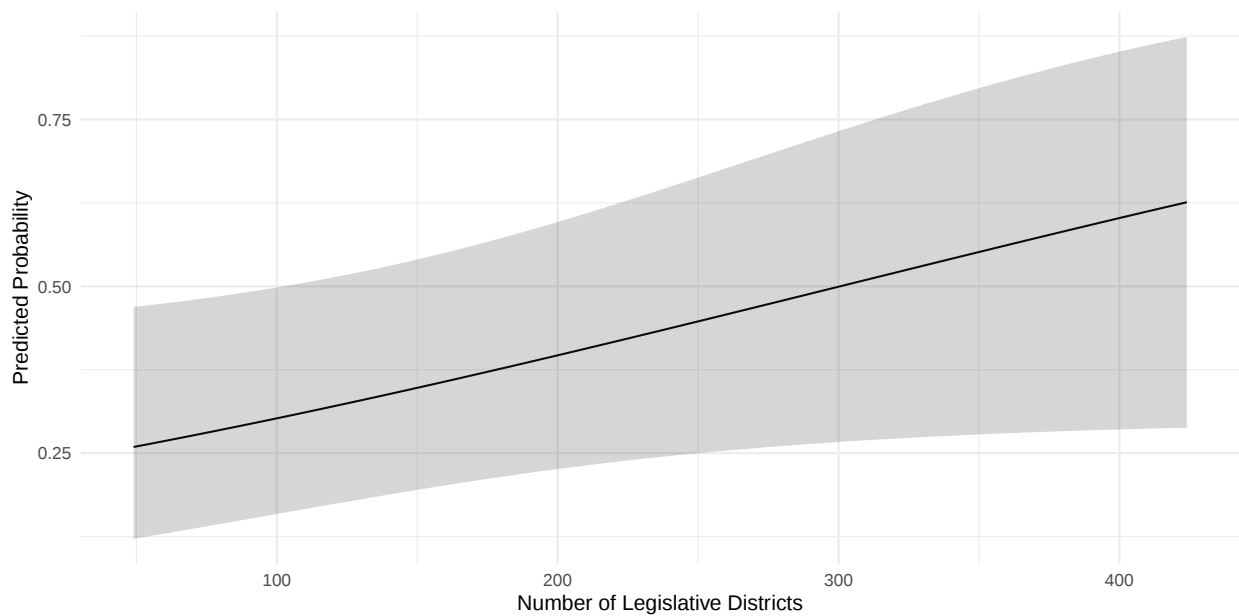


Figure 5: Predicted Probability of a State Party Chair Having Previous Electoral Experience by State Legislature Size

Note: This figure displays the predicted probability and corresponding 95 percent confidence interval of a state political party chair having previous electoral experience by state legislature size. All other independent variables are held at their mean or mode.

Since the size of coefficients from logistic regression models cannot be intuitively interpreted, I calculate predicted probabilities to better understand the real-world magnitude of these findings. First, Figure 5 displays the predicted probability and 95 confidence intervals of a state political party chair having previous electoral experience by state legislature size with all other independent variables held at their mean or mode. This figure indicates that states with large legislatures have a much higher probability of electing a state party chair with previous electoral experience than states with smaller legislatures. The state with the smallest state legislature, Nebraska, has a roughly 26 percent chance of electing a chair with previous political experience, but the state with the largest legislature, New Hampshire, has a roughly 63 percent chance of electing a chair with previous political experience. Even when considering less extreme values we see the magnitude of legislature size on seeing chairs with previous political experience is substantively meaningful. As stated previously, eight states have state legislatures smaller than 100 members which means these parties would have less than a 30 percent chance of being represented by a politician opposed to an activist. In comparison six states have more than 200 state legislators and political parties in these state parties would have greater than a 40 percent chance of being led by a politician instead of an activist.

Figure 6 displays the predicted probability and 95 confidence intervals of a state political party chair having previous electoral experience by state state political culture and term limit status with all other independent variables held at their mean or mode. In this figure we first see that the probability of a state political party electing a chair with previous political experience is about 0.13 to 0.14 higher in states with legislature term limits compared to states without legislative term limits. When switching from a traditionalistic state without term limits to a traditionalistic state with term limits the probability of having a chair with experience in elected office increased by 0.142. In moralistic states the increase in probability is 0.134 and in individualistic states the increase in probability is 0.141. Additionally, we see states with traditionalistic and moralistic political cultures have a similar likelihood of electing a state party chair with previous experience. In traditionalistic states the probability is about 0.29 in states without term limits and 0.43 in states

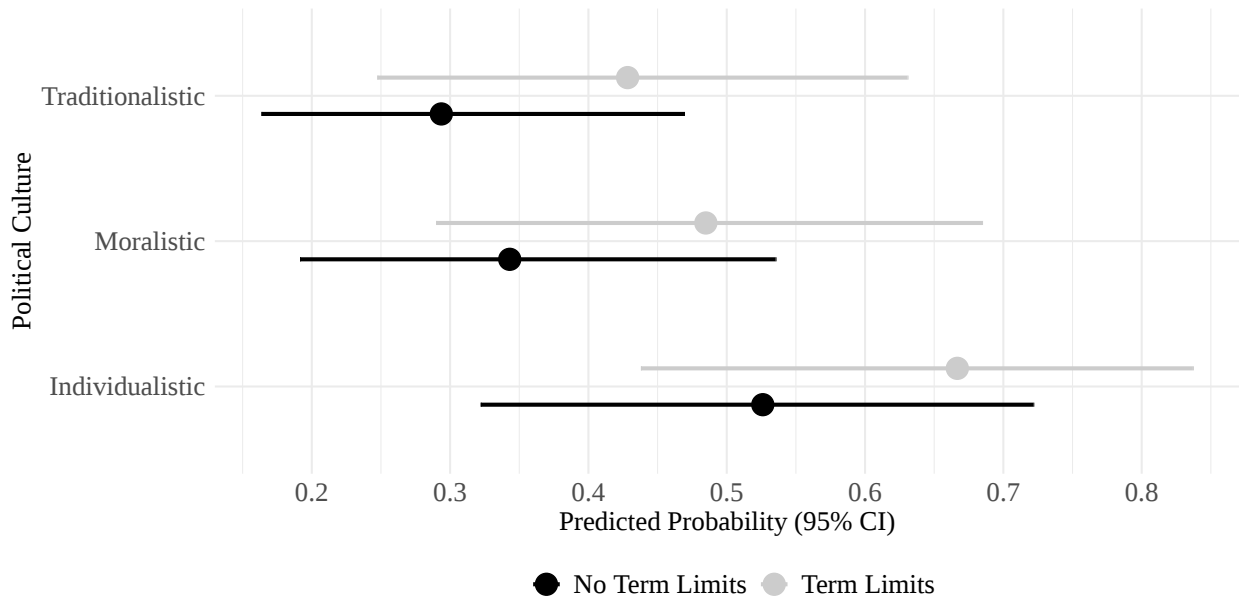


Figure 6: Predicted Probability of a State Party Chair Having Previous Electoral Experience by Political Culture and Term Limits

Note: This figure displays the predicted probability and corresponding 95 percent confidence interval of a state political party chair having previous electoral experience by state political culture and whether the state has term limits. All other independent variables are held at their mean or mode.

with term limits and in moralistic states the same probabilities are 0.34 and 0.48 respectively. However we see the probability of having a politician opposed to an activist as chair increases by 0.182 when comparing individualistic states to moralistic states and the probability of having a politician opposed to an activist as chair increased by about 23.5 when comparing individualistic to moralistic states.

Up to this point, I have operationalized both partisan competition and legislature professionalism as categorical variables. I have done this because I did not want to assume a linear relationship between continuous independent variables and a binary dependent variable. However to make sure the results presented in Figure 4 are not a result of this coding decisions, I replicate my analysis using continuous measures for each of these variables. Table 1 displays the results of two logistic regression models. Model 1 displays the same results presented in Figure 4 and Model 2 replicates these initial results while using a continuous measure for partisans competition, the state-level two

party vote for the chair's party in the most recent presidential and gubernatorial vote, and for legislative professionalism, by using the Squire Index (Squire 2017). Ultimately, the substantive and significant results do not vary across these models. Across both models, the relationship between partisan competition and the frequency of state parties electing chairs with previous electoral experience does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The same is true of the relationship between chairs having electoral experience and the degree of legislative professionalism in each state. Interestingly, I offered competing explanations for the relationship between both of these factors and the election of state party chairs with experience. The lack of significant findings seems to lend credence to my theory that there are reasons to expect that high competition and high professionalism would lead to more politically experienced chairs, but also reasons to expect that high competition and high professionalism would lead to fewer politically experienced chairs.

Beyond my stated hypothesis, Figure 4 and Table 1 reveal several other interesting trends about which state party chairs are most likely to have previous experience in elected office. In comparison to chairmen, chairwomen are less likely to have previous experience in elected office. This makes sense in the context that women remain underrepresented at most levels of government. Additionally, one of the reasons women remain underrepresented in government is they tend to be more sensitive than men to the costs associated with running for office such that they are often election averse (Kanthak & Woon 2015). It could be women are more interested in running for less-visible party chair elections compared to elections for public office like the state legislature but follow different career paths than men when they do run for state chair. I evaluate this finding more thoroughly in a different paper. Second, in comparison to White chairs, non-White chairs are more likely to have previous experience in elected office. Third, state chairs who have previously a local party organization are less likely to have experience in non-party elected office, but there is no relationship between a chair previously serving as state vice chair and having experience in non-party elected office. Fourth, more recently elected chairs, as evident by their year of election, tend to have more previous experience in elected office than less recently elected chair. Finally,

Table 1: Logistic Regression Estimating Elected Experience

	(1)	(2)
Partisan Competition (Pres.)	0.382 (0.324)	
Partisan Advantage (Pres.)	-0.129 (0.315)	
Partisan Competition (Gov.)	-0.295 (0.290)	
Partisan Advantage (Gov.)	-0.213 (0.347)	
Presidential Vote		-0.014 (0.013)
Gov. Vote		0.001 (0.012)
Traditionalistic	-0.982** (0.389)	-0.814** (0.353)
Moralistic	-0.754* (0.415)	-0.663* (0.384)
Legislature Size	0.004* (0.002)	0.005** (0.002)
Term Limits	0.589** (0.263)	0.737*** (0.260)
Hybrid Legislature	-0.102 (0.312)	
Full-Time Legislature	-0.497 (0.384)	
Squire Index		-1.253 (1.243)
Start Year	0.054* (0.028)	0.055** (0.028)
Woman	-0.854*** (0.270)	-0.835*** (0.266)
Non-White	0.531 (0.324)	0.531* (0.321)
Previous Local Chair	-0.936*** (0.280)	-0.885*** (0.275)
Previous Vice Chair	0.032 (0.308)	-0.025 (0.307)
Democratic Party	0.170 (0.247)	0.155 (0.245)
Mayhew TPO	-0.070 (0.106)	-0.070 (0.102)
Constant	-108.234* (56.357)	-110.346** (55.830)
Observations	374	374
Log Likelihood	-231.491	-232.802
Akaike Inf. Crit.	498.982	495.605

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Mayhew's conceptualization of traditional party organizations, which in this research is a proxy for state party strength, does not have a significant relationship with a state chair's experience in elected office.

Discussion

Using a new dataset developed through an examination of the biographies of all state political party chairs since 2015, this paper finds it is actually quite common for state political party chairs to have political experience outside of their respective political parties. Among the 374 state party chairs examined in this dataset, about 42 percent hold, or have previously held, an elected office beyond that of party chair. Another 15 percent of chairs have unsuccessfully run for a non-party elected office in the past. It is most common for state party chairs to have gained their experience in elected office at state level, particularly in the state legislature. When evaluating my hypothesis about the societal and political factors that may explain which state parties are most likely to elect chairs with previous political experience, I find partisan competition has no meaningful effect on whether a state party elects a chair with previous experience in elected office, but states with an individualistic political culture are more likely than states with either a moralistic or a traditionalistic political culture to elect a state chair with experience in elected office. When considering institutional design, I find states with large legislatures and legislative term limits are more likely to elect politicians opposed to activists to the position of state party chair. Legislative professionalism is not an important factor in explaining where politicians are most likely to be elected state party chair. Additionally, chairwomen are less likely than chairmen to have previous electoral experience, while non-White chairs tend to have more experience than White chairs. Recently elected chairs tend to have more previous electoral experience when compared to less recently elected chairs. Finally, when a chair has previously served as chair of a local party organization, they are less likely to have experience in non-party elected office.

The findings in this paper provide a new insights about the career paths of the individuals who lead our state and local political parties, which is important since party leaders recruit and support candidates, mobilize voters, and shape politics more broadly at all levels of government. While these findings are informative, there is more work to be done, which will further the discipline's understanding of how and when political ambition mixes with the motivations to become a party activist. Future research should consider whether other factors influence when and

where experienced politicians run for and win party leadership positions. Specifically future research might consider measures of each party's organizational capacity (Cotter, Gibson, Bibby & Huckshorn 1984, Mayhew 1986, Hatch 2016, Whitesell, Reuning & Hannah 2023) and other state-level considerations like the diversity of the electorate. Second, this analysis could be expanded to consider progressive political ambition among state political party chairs by considering how often and when state party chairs use their positions of power within the party organization to run for non-party elected offices. Finally, qualitative interviews with current and former chairs as well as defeated state party chair candidates would also illuminate new answers to these questions. It is only by pursuing each of these avenues for further that we can truly know whether the position of state political party chair fails in the career paths of politicians.

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