

IS POLITICS A “FAMILY PROJECT”? THE GENDERED EFFECTS OF PARENTHOOD IN LOCAL POLITICAL CAREERS

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1. Introduction

Gender inequalities in political participation lead to barriers and limitations in women's access to political representation positions (Campbell & Childs, 2014), and motherhood has been identified as an important factor in shaping women's political involvement. Motherhood can constrain women's political ambition and self-recruitment to certain positions (Bernhard et al., 2021), it can shape how voters and gatekeepers perceive candidate's viability (Stalsburg, 2010) and it can also lead to a constraint in resources like time or availability given the imbalances between the public and private spheres of life.

Political positions are typically structured around a dedication model rooted in the male breadwinner role (MBM), a design that fails to align with the caretaking demands traditionally associated with women. These demands, derived from the gendered division of labour, are reinforced and reproduced with the arrival of children into families (Greenstein, 2000), a moment when gendered specialization in productive-reproductive tasks occurs (Lundberg & Rose, 2002): while women focus on reproductive/care work, men focus on productive work, usually adopting the role of the family's main provider. This situation causes family responsibilities to act as a limitation for women political ambitions, while for men, the opposite might occur (Bellettini et al., 2023).

Beyond the private sphere, the public institutions in which mothers integrate as representatives are gendered spaces (Hinze, 2024; Mackay et al., 2010), and as such, they reproduce gender biases that can be detrimental to their career progression. Because the structure of these institutions is designed around the MBM (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012), the prevailing institutional norms tend to be based in masculine roles (Erikson & Verge, 2022), creating a context where the work-life balance (or politics-family balance) needs of mothers are not met, leading to an unequal institutional culture for them.

The effects of fatherhood on political careers are theoretically ambiguous. RCT suggests that fatherhood may be more compatible with political leadership than motherhood since conventional gender norms associate men with breadwinning and public responsibility (Eagly & Karau, 2002). At the same time, parenthood can generate competing time demands for men as well as women (Lundberg & Rose, 2002). Empirically, recent work on child penalties in politics finds that parenthood disadvantages mothers' careers far more than fathers', consistent with an asymmetry in which fatherhood is often neutral or less damaging for men (Fiva & King, 2024). This evidence is consistent with the idea that fatherhood is more compatible with the breadwinner-oriented expectations surrounding political roles. However, existing evidence on the impact of fatherhood on men's political careers remains limited and does not support strong causal claims about the relationship between fatherhood and political career outcomes.

These material demands and normative expectations can reduce the time, availability, and perceived suitability that women associate with political careers (Fox & Lawless, 2014). This

effect could be mediated by the household's economic situation (Bernhard et al., 2021), especially in those political representation positions that are poorly or not professionalized, such as municipal governments in Spain.

In contrast, there is greater consensus in the literature that motherhood is associated with constraints on women's political involvement. The transition to motherhood often increases women's responsibility for childcare and domestic work, while gendered norms continue to define mothers as primary caregivers (Brearley, 2022). These material demands and normative expectations could be related to mothers' underrepresentation among officeholders. Fox and Lawless (2014) find that household composition—including marital status, motherhood, and the division of childcare labour—does not significantly predict women's nascent political ambition (the abstract desire to hold office someday). Bernhard, et al. (2021) refine this framework by distinguishing between nascent ambition and expressive ambition (the decision to become a candidate). They find evidence that women who are breadwinners, or who fear losing income as a result of running, are less likely to convert their nascent ambition into expressed ambition than women with less financial responsibility. In other words, motherhood could constrain candidacy primarily when it is combined with responsibility for household income, operating less on women's abstract ambition than on their ability to translate that ambition into an actual candidacy. This mechanism may be particularly important in political positions that are poorly or not professionalized, such as municipal governments in Spain.

While both fathers and mothers in politics frequently report challenges in balancing their representative roles with family life (Franceschet & Rayment, 2025), quantitative literature identifies a "motherhood penalty" that is not observed for fathers (Fiva & King, 2024). This discrepancy suggests that the difficulty in balancing these roles may not be experienced symmetrically, but further research is needed on the specific mechanisms by which this issue presents gendered outcomes in political careers.

Therefore, we seek to investigate the motherhood-related mechanisms that could lead women's political careers in a different path as men's, guided by the following question: What are the mechanisms by which motherhood has negative effects on the careers of political representatives?

2. How Supply and Demand Dynamics Reproduce Role Incongruity for Mothers in Politics

While existing literature highlights that both men and women in politics report significant difficulties in balancing their representative roles with family life (Franceschet & Rayment, 2025), quantitative research reveals a marked divergence in outcomes: motherhood can act as a "penalty" on women's political careers while it doesn't seem to represent a setback in the political careers of fathers (Fiva & King, 2024). To understand why this divergence persists, we must analyse how the political institutions—and the expectations of political leadership—act as gendered environments that don't align with the reality of motherhood and caregiving.

According to the Role Congruity Theory, the incongruence between motherhood and political representation arises from the perception that these roles belong to distinct and conflicting spheres of life—with motherhood being associated with communal

characteristics such as care, empathy and sensitivity and not so much with agentic characteristics such as assertiveness, decisiveness and leadership— (Deason et al., 2015). This perception can manifest both through an internal, self-perceived incongruence or through external pressure, which manifests through two primary spheres:

- *Private sphere/supply side: The mother role and motherhood ideologies*

Child-rearing requires significant time, energy, and emotional labour. Social norms and ideologies around motherhood—and the internal pressure women place upon themselves to meet them (Rúðólfssdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024)—dictate that a mother must prioritize the domestic sphere. This creates a cultural "congruity" between motherhood and the private sphere, which stands in direct contrast to the public orientation of political representation (Stalsburg, 2010). The supply-side original formulation (Norris & Lovenduski, 1994) already considers personal and family circumstances as part of the resources and constraints that shapes women's willingness to present as candidates, but this idea can be extended further: it's important to take into consideration not only whether women have the time or resources to run, but also whether they perceive themselves as fitting for the role (Fox & Lawless, 2014), and how could their motherhood role interfere with a political career.

- *Public sphere/demand side: The male breadwinner model (MBM) in politics*

Political institutions are historically designed around an "ideal" gender-less representative: a figure unburdened by primary caregiving responsibilities, capable of maintaining 24/7 availability (Erikson & Verge, 2022). This institutional design reflects the MBM, where the representative is typically supported by a partner who absorbs the "second shift" of domestic labour. Consequently, institutions reward those who can embody this gender-less ideal while systematically disadvantaging primary caregivers (Smith, 2024). While the demand-side original formulation revolved around the gatekeeping process of candidate selection (Norris & Lovenduski, 1994), it can also be extended toward the institutional dynamics that operate after entering politics. These gendered norms appear neutral on the surface but function as institutional barriers. By failing to accommodate the realities of active caregiving, political spaces privilege those with limited domestic duties (Erikson & Verge, 2022). This reinforces the incongruity between care-oriented roles and the traditional archetype of a political leader, creating an environment where mothers face unequal treatment in both high-level decision-making processes and the day-to-day exercise of their representative roles.

Read together, these two sides of constriction answer different questions. RCT gives us an understanding on why parenting has a bigger weight on women's political careers: because motherhood and political representation aren't socially constructed as two roles to be held at once. Mothers who pursue political careers are, in this sense, perceived as stepping outside the expected role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The supply/demand model (Norris & Lovenduski, 1994) allows us to understand how this incongruity is engrained in political institutions, distinguishing the specific barriers that originate in the private sphere (supply) from those rooted in the public sphere (demand). Read together, if we picture the decision to pursue a political career as a balance, the supply/demand model identifies which constraints are placed on each side of that balance, while RCT explains why the same set of factors moves the balance differently for women than for men.

Additionally, this balance is not fixed at a single decision point but is renegotiated repeatedly across a political career and re-activated whenever family or institutional

circumstances shift — which is why we differentiate between the decision to enter politics and the decision to remain in politics. Prior work such as Fiva & King (2024) examines whether motherhood has a negative effect on women's careers by capturing a specific moment; because we instead understand this decision-making process as a continuum rather than a single event, we examine which factors women identify as weighing on that balance, and how they reason through it across their political trajectory.

We propose that analysing the decision-making process —both the initial run for office and the choice to continue across multiple cycles— could clarify the mechanisms by which motherhood influences women's political careers. While existing literature extensively documents the difficulties women encounter in achieving a work-family (or politics-family) balance once in office, the decision-making phase remains relatively under-researched. This study addresses this gap by examining whether the anticipation or accumulation of caretaking conflicts acts as a significant deterrent, and how this could lead to disparities in political trajectories between women and men.

Based on the literature review, it is possible to affirm that child-rearing processes frequently imply, at least for women, prioritizing family over other spheres of life, leading to a slowdown or even a setback in women's professional careers (Brearley, 2022). These dynamics may also extend to political careers, where women are less likely to gain leadership positions than men after becoming parents (Fiva & King, 2024).

Therefore, this study pursues two main objectives. First, we seek to identify the impacts of motherhood on the decision to enter politics, examining how women evaluate the compatibility between motherhood, family responsibilities, and the demands of political participation when considering whether to pursue office. Second, we seek to identify the impacts of motherhood on the decision to remain in politics, examining how this balance is renegotiated once women are already engaged in political work and face the ongoing demands of both political representation and caregiving:

O1. Identify the impacts of motherhood on the decision to enter in politics.

O2. Identify the impacts of motherhood on the decision to remain in politics.

3. The Spanish Local Governments

In order to investigate the proposed objectives, a research design is developed aimed at collecting existing discourses around parenthood in the field of local governments in Spain. This specific focus on Spanish local governments is justified for several reasons:

Firstly, many Spanish municipalities suffer from what is known as "inframunicipalismo". This refers to the phenomenon where a significant number of municipalities are very small and lack the necessary resources to provide all the services they are legally competent to deliver to their population (Harguindéguy & Ruiloba Nuñez, 2023). This often translates into a huge workload for council members, frequently for little to no pay, which significantly increases the pressure on those who must balance a regular job, their council role, and parental responsibilities.

Secondly, the institutional design in Spain often maintains a strong mayor role, concentrating almost all authority and decision-making power in the mayor. This entails

immense responsibility and a considerable time commitment, further exacerbating the politics-family balance challenges, particularly for parents in these critical positions.

4. Research Design

To achieve our research goals, a qualitative methodology is applied, with fieldwork that includes seven focus groups with 25 female council members and mayors conducted within the framework of the GENPOL project in the spring of 2022. This will be contrasted with three additional focus groups with 5 male participants.

The fieldwork employed an exploratory approach. In each focus group, the moderator introduced the topic of parenthood using an open-ended question—typically phrased as, “Is it possible to balance motherhood and political representation?”—. The subsequent analysis of transcripts is based on an inductive coding approach, allowing the participants' own discourses to reveal the factors and mechanisms through which motherhood influences women's local political trajectories.

Participants were selected using a non-probability recruitment strategy, utilizing three distinct channels:

- Publicly Available Contact Information: identifying and contacting female council members directly through email addresses or phone numbers listed on municipal or political party websites.
- Political Party Intermediaries: engaging with political parties to gain access to their network of council members and mayors.
- Snowball Sampling: encouraging established participants to facilitate contact with additional professional colleagues.

Although this non-probability design does not allow for statistical representativeness, we implemented specific sampling criteria to ensure ideological, geographical, and institutional diversity. We actively contacted participants from all Autonomous Communities, covering a range of municipal population sizes, various government departments, and a broad spectrum of political ideologies (including left-wing, right-wing, and nationalist parties).

5. The motherhood penalty in local politics: how women and mothers decide about running for office

Current literature suggests that motherhood often imposes a "penalty" on women's political careers, whereas fatherhood frequently carries a neutral—or even positive—effect for men. This section analyses how female local representatives perceive the impact of motherhood on political life, examining whether it functions as a limiting factor or even an entry barrier to Spanish local councils.

5.1. The "family project": collective decision-making around entering politics

5.1.1. Supply Side and Family Agreement

Findings displayed in this work suggest that, for mothers, entering politics is rarely an individual step. On the contrary, it usually is a negotiation requiring the consent and active support of the household. In that sense, we can perceive some “permission” and “pact” dynamics occurring during family negotiations, which represent a crucial part of the decision-making process for most respondents.

Participants frequently describe political involvement as something that must be “consulted” and “agreed upon” with partners, parents, and sometimes children. This is where the idea of politics as a “family project” emerges: respondents state that the potential shift in family dynamics will affect the entire household. Therefore, they consider it a collective decision to be made, and they accept the role only once they have secured household support:

"Even so, it was very difficult for me to decide. I did talk to my family, even though I didn't have children at the time, but to my parents and my partner [and I said], 'Look, I have been offered this, how do you see it?' Because I believe that it has to be a family project, because of the good things and the not-so-good things, because I have to say, with all respect, that not everyone sees things the way you do, and that... I say it has to be a family project." (C1Junts, Council Member, Right-wing, Mother).

"And, well, also consulting it with the family, because as C1Junts commented, in the end, it is a family project; everyone is involved." (C2Junts, Council Member, Right-wing, Mother).

"So they proposed it to me and I, well, at first I said no, and no, and no, and no. And they came to my office up to 5 or 6 times. I said, 'No, I'm sorry, I will help you with anything, but I will not be part of any list, nor head any list, or anything.'

And in the end, well, I thought, I have to propose it to my family, I have to tell my family and see what they think, because they insisted so much. And perhaps it was a bit of a surprise, because I know that, for example, my husband doesn't like politics at all—he is totally apolitical. And when I told him, well, he said to me, 'Look, I am not going to tell you anything about what you have to do or where you want to participate or anything; I'll only tell you one thing: either you decide now and you are part of it, or you forget about it forever and we never bring back this topic again.' So I suppose that was what made me make the decision, because I said, 'Well, why am I going to say no? If I, truthfully, have always liked politics and I have always, in some way, been close to it.' So I said yes, I said yes." (A2PP, Mayor, Right-wing, Mother).

5.1.2. Demand Side and Politics-Family Balance

Without a “pact” to share the domestic load, the politician role is often deemed impossible. Participants emphasize that without the support of their families —specifically their partners— they would be unable to maintain their political activities. This highlights both the inherent incompatibility of the roles and the fact that, when women face these conflicts, their family responsibilities are often prioritized, which can lead to abandon their political ambitions.

"I believe that this family support was very important for me because I knew that this was going to imply a personal and family sacrifice. I have two children, they are older now, but they weren't then, and it was a decision where I wanted and I needed to feel the backing of my family to help me in this situation." (A1PNV, Mayor, Right-wing, Mother).

"As it has been commented before, when we decide to enter politics, we do it with the support of our families, without which it would be impossible for us to make this jump into politics from other spheres, whether from the private sphere or other types of jobs.

Certainly, being a mother and a politician at the same time, if it is not with a network that helps you, that family that has told you: 'come on, yes, run, we trust you, we support you.' Well, they have to support you more than ever in the case of being a mom because it is complicated, especially when they are so little (...)." (A3PP, Mayor, Right-wing, Mother).

"(...) I could not do what I do if I didn't have the company I have, I mean, I have that very clear. And because he, on top of that, has assumed things and at a certain moment, also, from the conversation of 'you go ahead, I'll take over now,' right? And that doesn't always happen, and in my case, well, I say, if it hadn't been for that pact and we hadn't understood each other..." (C3PSOE, Council Member, Left-wing, Mother)

"In the end, when you take on a position like this, in my case, at least, it was like a pact. If I get on this train, we both have to pull it. It cannot be that everything falls on the role of the mother, because it would be impossible, then, to take on a public office in a local administration, because it is not possible; I mean, it is not possible to exercise both things at the same time at 100%. So, well, it was a pact; it was discussed and meditated, and the truth is that, in my case as well, if it weren't for the help I have from my husband, well, it would be very complicated to be able to take on all the roles, that of politician and that of mother. But, well, it is day by day, step by step." (C4PSOE, Mother).

5.1.3. When the Decision Remains Individual

In contrast, for some participants the main reason to enter local politics is framed through individual ambition or a sense of civic duty:

"After working at the City Council for two years, the former mayor suggested me to join him in politics; I didn't think twice. I said yes immediately." (A1PP, Mayor, Right-wing, Mother)

"Did it take me time to consider? No, because in my case, I am 25 years old and I honestly view this as an experience to learn. I am a political scientist, so national politics is something I have always loved, and well, as I say when people ask me about the next four years, 'well, in four years a lot of things can happen and I don't really think about it.'" (C2PSOE, Council Member, Left-wing, Non mother).

These examples illustrate that, for some, political entry is perceived as an individual choice based mostly on their political ambition. However, this is not the universal experience. In fact, most of the discourses analysed—even when expressing political ambition—show that this motivation is mediated by the potential impact on their family life. For the majority, the "individual" choice is subordinated to the collective constraints of domestic and caretaking realities. This contrast is particularly salient given that men tend to frame their decision-making about entering politics as an individual one (Basanta & Alonso, in press).

5.2 Politics as a “stage”: the cost of remaining

Many mothers frame their involvement as a temporary "stage", a collective effort made by themselves and their families to contribute to the local council, rather than a long-lasting political career:

"But well, at the end of the day, I made the decision because I believe that life is made of stages, and this is... it is one, and participating in the things and important decisions of the town, well, it is a stage, and I decided and said yes. And it is also true that, like the rest of my colleagues, the decision, I consulted it with my family. They told me that they were going to support me in everything that... in everything that I did, but it is true that it was much harder to decide for their sake than for my own." (C2PP, Council Member, Right-wing, Non mother).

5.2.1. Supply Side and Motherhood Identity

The MBM design of political representative roles creates a conflict for mothers, who must balance the intense, time-consuming nature of their political duties with their caretaking responsibilities, which can lead them to delay entering local government until their children are older. Once in office, when caretaking demands become too high, women often reopen the decision-making process, sometimes choosing to step back:

"That said, when the two of them gave me a little more breathing room, when the little one, well obviously, you say, 'well, look, man, you're ten years old, you can take care of yourself a bit.' Then you say, 'well, I can get a little more into politics now,' because in fact, of course, you have to go out, you have to move to another town, you have to go to the Provincial Council..." (C5PSOE, Council Member, Left-wing Mother).

"And when it comes to having a child or a baby, well, in the previous legislature, in the previous mandate, one of my councilwoman colleagues got pregnant, she had a baby, and in this last one she did not want to repeat because she didn't see herself as capable. She had, well, a split-time work schedule, she spent the whole day out, the child, well, had problems during the birth and now needs special treatment and rehabilitation. Well, in the end, her life changed in such a way that, well, she had to renounce something and she renounced politics, even though she liked it, right? And, well, in this case her partner—and this is entering into judging where it does not correspond to me, but a little from the outside—is her partner, who works the same job (...), and, well, she was the one who asked for a reduction in working hours, she is the one who takes the child to rehabilitation, and she is the one who renounced

that, let's say, hobby or that extra, to attend to the child, because he has other, well, he runs these things that are very fashionable now, the trails and all this, and, well, he has his time to train and everything, and she renounced, right?, to continue and, well, temporarily, let's say, well, until the child finishes that treatment and already, well, is a little older and she can have a little more time." (C1BNG, Council member, Left-wing, Non mother).

Some participants also note that their male colleagues do not renounce their political ambitions for these reasons, or at least, the politics-family balance does not place the same level of stress upon them:

"But in terms of decisions, of deciding to enter politics or deciding to head a list, to run for mayor, I completely agree with what C5PSOE said, that it is much easier for men, both in making the decision—well, generalizing, there will be some case that is not like that—but also in how they maintain it afterwards, maintaining that balance between private life and municipal life. You can see that in the meetings and in their attitude." (C1BNG, Council Member, Left-wing, Non mother).

5.2.2. Demand Side and the Politician Role

Beyond the direct politics-family balance issues, factors related to the well-being of their families—ranging from emotional exposure to domestic labour demands—also can act as deterrents to the participants' political involvement.

Participants express significant anxiety regarding how public exposure, specifically through social media, might affect their family members. This fear leads many to question whether it is worthwhile to continue their political trajectory after the current term. This anxiety is often intensified for mothers:

"(...) I was terrified that my parents or my siblings would go out into the street and someone would say to them, 'well, your sister or your daughter...' and even more so when you don't even have to go out into the street; with just a click you go onto Facebook or something and...

(...) that is definitely something that held me back a lot, and today I don't know if I would say yes again for a third term because of those kinds of things, although, of course, it also has things that are very rewarding." (C2PP, Council Member, Right-wing, Non mother).

"(...) this time I said yes, but it is what leads me to try to consider what to do for the next term, since my daughter will already be 5 or 6 years old, which possibly (...), well, [back then] there wasn't so much fear... but now yes, now with my young daughter, I am more afraid of the issue of social media." (C1UP, Council Member, Left-wing, Mother).

Finally, candidates engage in a self-assessment of their "suitability," which is influenced by gendered expectations of how a representative should behave. The "time-intensive" nature of the role is often inherently incongruent with maintaining family life:

"(...) Yes, it is true that women access [local councils] more, but the day-to-day is so intense that what often happens is that we are there for very little time, and when

you take a step forward, and I find myself doing this, we have many doubts about whether to maintain it or take a step back—or maybe not back, but to the side. Because the day-to-day, I would basically summarize it as very intense, many hours." (C1ERC, Council Member, Left-wing, Mother).

6. Discussion and conclusions

Answer to RQ: The mechanism is the transformation of political ambition from an individual choice into a negotiated family project, driven by the traditionalization of reproductive work and an institutional design built on the MBM.

Does this happen to fatherhood? No. Men's careers do not require the same household negotiation or temporal "stages" (Basanta & Alonso, in press).

Implications: To reduce the motherhood penalty, local political institutions must move beyond the "gender-less" fallacy and accommodate active caregivers (e.g., family-friendly schedules, remote participation, care allowances).

7. References

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ANNEX I.

Table 1. Focus groups sample

Participant code	Role	Political Party	Ideology	Population	Parental Status
C1PP	Council member	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	25.000-50.000	Non mother
C1PSOE	Council member	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	Left-wing	25.000-50.000	Non mother
C1IU	Council member	Izquierda Unida (IU)	Left-wing	25.000-50.000	Mother
C2PP	Council member	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	25.000-50.000	Non mother
C3PP	Council member	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	25.000-50.000	Mother
C1UP	Council member	Unidas Podemos (UP)	Left-wing	25.000-50.000	Mother
C1Junts	Council member	Junts per Catalunya	Right-wing, nationalist	25.000-50.000	Mother
C2Junts	Council member	Junts per Catalunya	Right-wing, nationalist	25.000-50.000	Mother
A1PP	Mayor	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	10.000-25.000	Mother
A2PP	Mayor	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	>5.000	Mother
A1PSOE	Mayor	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	Left-wing	10.000-25.000	Non mother
A1Bildu	Mayor	Euskal Herria Bildu	Left-wing, nationalist	>5.000	Mother
A1VOX	Mayor	VOX	Right-wing	5.000-10.000	Mother
A3PP	Mayor	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	25.000-50.000	Mother
A1IU	Mayor	Izquierda Unida (IU)	Left-wing	50.000-200.000	Non mother

A1PNV	Mayor	Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)	Right-wing, nationalist	50.000-200.000	Mother
C2PSOE	Council member	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	Left-wing	<200.000	Non mother
C3PSOE	Council member	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	Left-wing	<200.000	Mother
C4PSOE	Council member	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	Left-wing	<200.000	Mother
C4PP	Council member	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	<200.000	Non mother
C1ERC	Council member	Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)	Left-wing, nationalist	<200.000	Mother
C5PP	Council member	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	>2.000	Mother
C6PP	Council member	Partido Popular (PP)	Right-wing	>2.000	Non mother
C5PSOE	Council member	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)	Left-wing, nationalist	>2.000	Mother
C1BNG	Council member	Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG)	Left-wing, nationalist	>2.000	Non mother

Source: Own elaboration