

**Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office.** By Jennifer L. Lawless. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 302p. \$99.00 cloth, \$27.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592713000546

— Todd L. Belt, *University of Hawaii at Hilo*

The question “Why do some people run for office?” has always been an intriguing one for political scientists, but it has never been a more pressing one. There is a striking dearth of electoral competition at every level of governance, but especially at the local level, where most officials start their careers in elected office. But who has time to canvass, raise money, attend events, and recruit volunteers just to roll the dice on a low-paying and privacy-sapping career? And who would want to, given the increasingly negative tone of political campaigns?

This book is the latest to take on the question of candidate emergence, but does so with a level of rigor and theory building unmatched in prior works. While other studies have investigated influences on the decision to run for office, this book is the first to evaluate the dynamics of political ambition—how the desire to run for office waxes and wanes over time. To pull off this extraordinary feat, the author builds a theory of political ambition that looks into the antecedent conditions of candidate emergence, marshaling data from an impressive panel-survey data set, supplemented with interviews. These panel data make the results of this work much more compelling than previous studies that have largely depended upon anecdotal evidence.

A major gap in the candidate emergence literature has been the fact that previous studies are based on trends in who runs for office, without investigating who does not. Such a lack of variance on the key dependent variable is glaring. Understanding who runs and who does not helps to isolate factors that may deter otherwise potential leaders from developing. To do this, the author’s sample is comprised not merely of individuals who have already made the decision to run for office but also people she describes as “eligible candidates” (p. 6). These are successful people from the four occupations most associated with office holders: lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists. While some might view the decision to sample from these four occupations as a bit tautological, it would be difficult to envision an alternative strategy. The only alternative that has been developed is the use of a snowball technique based on individuals’ reputation within the community, which is subject to selection bias.

The individuals surveyed form a panel study that is impressive in terms of size and scope. The author draws upon nearly 3,800 eligible candidates for the first wave of the study. The second wave comes after a seven-year lag and has more than 2,000 respondents. Of these, the author interviews 300 in depth to add texture to the data (200 in the first wave, 100 in the second).

These panel data are necessary to untangle the multiple effects on the dynamics of eligible candidates’ political ambition, which, according to the author’s theory, comes in two stages. The first stage is nascent political ambition, which is the potential an individual has for becoming interested in politics, long before a decision is made (p. 19). Nascent ambition is influenced by ethnicity, sex, family dynamics, professional experiences, and political attitudes. Ambition in its nascent stage causes a potential candidate either never to run or to take the next step toward expressive ambition, which involves the calculus of making the decision to actually run for office. Expressive ambition has been the subject of all prior research on candidate emergence and its main correlates have been shown to be the political opportunity structure. As noted by Linda L. Fowler and Robert D. McClure in their landmark book *Political Ambition*: “It takes a spark of opportunity to ignite the flame of congressional ambition” (1989, 15). The author investigates this and other factors that impact expressive ambition and how this ambition evolves over time.

On the basis of this bifurcated theory of ambition, the author looks at two dependent variables—considering a candidacy and actually entering a race. Surprisingly, the standard political-opportunity-structure variables found in the candidate emergence literature provide little explanatory value for predicting nascent ambition. This underscores the problem associated with earlier scholarship focused on announced candidates, who may have been just looking for the right time to jump in while maintaining a healthy reserve of nascent political ambition.

Women, regardless of ethnicity, are not only less likely to enter a political race but also less likely to even consider running for office than their male counterparts. What matters for the cultivation of nascent political ambition are family dynamics that start early on in an individual’s life. When it comes to expressive ambition, familial factors work in a different way; encouragement from a family member is more important than family dynamics at the time of the decision to enter (such as divorce or presence of children living at home). Not surprisingly, being responsible for the majority of household tasks and child care suppresses an individual’s expressive ambition (p. 90).

The author’s analysis of career paths reveals interesting trends as well. Lawyers and political activists outstrip business leaders and educators when it comes to political ambition. The author demonstrates that resources like contacts within the political community and political skills explain the differences among these groups. Importantly, these resources are built and reinforced throughout the course of an individual’s career, leading to greater or less ambition. Self-assessed qualifications, political participation, and recruitment by party leaders (still the biggie) are what cause eligible candidates to take the fateful step to enter a

race. Over time, changes in self-perception of qualifications explain changes in the decision to run for office.

These are just a few of the fascinating findings in *Becoming a Candidate*—made possible by the twin contributions of the dynamic theory and the panel data. The author investigates many of these findings in greater detail, and correlates them to other forms of political participation short of running for office. She shows how political recruitment works by identifying the types of political participation that catch the eye of party gatekeepers.

This is an important study. It identifies and remedies the flaws in prior research on candidate emergence. It is imperative that we understand how our system, such as it is, encourages some and dissuades others when it comes to political ambition. The author does a monumental job in that regard. She rightly focuses on eligible candidates in the gestation period of their political lives. This is noteworthy, since nearly 80% of eligible candidates seek a local race as their first foray into politics (p. 38). It is troubling that the results show a small decrease in the amount of eligible candidates seriously considering running for office between the two waves of the study. Fortunately, the author has shown us how to cultivate the nascent political ambition of future leaders in order to overcome this trend.

**Guest Workers and Resistance to U.S. Corporate Despotism.** By Immanuel Ness. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 232p. \$70.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.  
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— Alexandra Délano, *The New School*

In January of 2004, George W. Bush proposed a new temporary worker program that would “match willing foreign workers with willing American employers, when no Americans can be found to fill the jobs.” He argued that this system would protect “decent, hard-working people” with labor laws, including the right to change jobs and earn fair wages, and that they would “enjoy the same working conditions that the law requires for American workers.” Against the prevailing view that any comprehensive immigration reform should include new or expanded guest worker programs based on similar principles to those laid out in Bush’s proposal, Immanuel Ness argues that if these efforts succeed, conditions for all workers, immigrants and US-born workers alike, will significantly diminish.

Scholars and practitioners interested in labor migration, and particularly guest worker programs, will find in this book a cautionary argument against this policy option, mainly from the perspective of labor rights. For those familiar with Ness’s previous book, *Immigrants, Unions, and the New U.S. Labor Market* (2005), it will not be surprising to find that one of his main concerns regarding guest worker programs is that given their “temporality” and the lack of government oversight regarding

conditions of employment and housing, employers do not respect immigrant workers’ rights and limit their ability to organize. This has led not only to declines in union membership but to what Ness identifies as an erosion of solidarity among all workers.

At the title suggests, the book is largely a critique of businesses that hire foreign-born guest workers under dire conditions. According to Ness, together with the US government, corporations have created a demand for exploitable foreign labor instead of raising wages and work conditions for US-born workers. He argues that US businesses promote guest worker programs “to reinforce control over a foreign labor force that will fear union organizing and is exposed to labor, workplace and human rights violations” (p. 3). Moreover, he describes the conditions of employment through US guest worker programs as onerous, exploitative, “as abusive as indentured servitude” (p. 3), and even worse than those that undocumented workers face given the ties that bind guest workers to their employers.

The usual justification for establishing guest worker programs is that native-born workers are unqualified or unwilling to take the jobs available, or that there are not enough workers to fill the gaps given demographic changes. Ness questions whether these alleged labor shortages actually exist or are rather a result of the US government’s unwillingness to improve education and technical training programs in the sectors that have the highest demand for guest workers. Coupled with businesses’ attempts to remain competitive by maintaining low wages and unfavorable working conditions, these conditions make these jobs undesirable for US workers that would presumably demand higher wages or better labor conditions. Furthermore, Ness claims that guest worker programs increase rates of unemployment and lower wages for the working class as a whole. However, this argument is weakened by the fact that he does not provide data to show a decline in wages or an increase in unemployment over time for a specific group, or in a specific sector or a state or city that has relied on guest worker programs in the US.

The book lacks a general overview of existing categories and data about guest worker programs in the US, as well as detailed information about how these programs operate and how their operations change over time. Hence, the reader is often presented with a denunciatory argument that lacks sufficient supporting evidence. When Ness does present evidence from his two case studies focused on Indian and Jamaican workers, a question also remains about whether the undeniably powerful and revealing stories he relays about cases of exploitation do reflect a larger trend. A more thorough explanation of his methods complemented with data about these programs, the workers that participate in them, and reports about abuse across time would strengthen the book’s argument about the negative effects of guest worker programs.