

The Political Consequences of the Mental Load*

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Abstract

How do levels of cognitive household labor – the “mental load” involved in anticipating, fulfilling, and monitoring household needs – affect political engagement? The mental load is distinct from the physical tasks of e.g., cooking and cleaning, and thought to be disproportionately undertaken by women. Thus far, the few studies addressing the issue have used qualitative methods to document it, and the topic has yet to be studied in political science research. As a result, we may be underestimating household gender gaps and their impact on politics. To investigate this question, I field a descriptive survey on politics and household work to parents in the United States. My survey’s novel approach uses a series of questions that ask about who in the household does different cognitive labor tasks. I argue that women have higher mental loads than men, and large mental loads decrease political interest for women. I find support for this theory: women report being mostly responsible for 70 percent of cognitive household labor, while men report being mostly responsible for 30 percent. This 40 percent gender gap is twice as large as the gender gap in physical household labor, and it persists across a range of characteristics. Additionally, I find that the mental load moderates the relationship between gender and political interest, with women, but not men, reporting less interest in politics as the mental load increases. Taken together, my findings offer new empirical evidence about a gender gap too often hidden, and its consequences for equality in democratic life.

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The Covid-19 pandemic has increased gender gaps in household labor and workforce participation (Alon et al. 2020; Collins et al. 2021; Lyttelton, Zang & Musick 2020). Many parents have struggled to balance caregiving and work, with schools and daycares shut or moved to remote learning for long periods of time. Part of this additional labor consists of not just physical tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or looking after children but mental tasks. Such tasks include ensuring that children make it to Zoom sessions on time, checking in with isolated relatives, and organizing socially distanced extracurricular activities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these mental burdens fall to women – and mothers, especially.¹ Women, but not men, report higher levels of anxiety and depression due to the drastic increase in what was already a double shift (Lyttelton, Zang & Musick 2020). There is every reason to think that the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated a gender gap that is too often hidden: the “mental load”.

The mental load is the cognitive labor involved in anticipating, fulfilling, and monitoring household needs. It includes remembering schedules and deadlines, arranging goods and services to support the household, reminding others of what needs to be done, household financial management, finding child care solutions, and juggling priorities and time conflicts (Robertson et al. 2019). The mental load can often involve not only the cognitive labor of managing these tasks, but the emotional labor of worrying about completing them (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner 2022). This concept gained traction as a cultural touch point with the publication of the French feminist cartoonist Emma’s comic about the issue in 2017,² and recently path-breaking literature from sociology uses in-depth interviews to define the phenomenon conceptually (Daming 2019). To date, no studies exist measuring the mental load quantitatively, and no studies investigate the potential political causes or consequences

¹See, for example, the February 2021 *New York Times* feature story, “The Primal Scream: America’s Mothers are in Crisis” and the August 2022 CNN feature, “Women were already tired. Then 2022 happened”.

²“You Should’ve Asked,” by Emma, 20 May 2017.

of this hidden source of gender inequality. This matters because we might be underestimating gender gaps in the household, and failing to target interventions to close what is likely a persistent gap.

As a first step, I field a descriptive survey to 1,528 parents in the United States to shed light on the following research questions. First, how do levels of the mental load differ across gender and household context? Second, how does the mental load affect levels of political interest for men and women? The United States, with its relatively high level of women’s employment combined with scant federal support for parental leave and child care, offers an extreme case.³ I expect gender gaps in the mental load to be large. The potential ramifications of this hidden gender gap are extensive. Women have made significant progress in education and the labor force within a relatively short span of time. Yet, if women but not men remain the ones mainly responsible for managing household labor, gender gaps in the workforce and politics are likely to persist. For the sake of this paper I focus on consequences for one type of political engagement in particular, interest in politics, arguing that women’s high mental loads can “crowd out” mental space for interest in politics.

I find evidence of large gender gaps in cognitive household labor which persist across nearly every household context and individual-level characteristic assessed. Women report being mostly responsible for 70 percent of cognitive household labor according to my task-based measure, while men report responsibility for 30 percent. This gender gap of 40 percent is twice as large as the gender gap I find for the estimated share of physical household labor, and it does not vary significantly by income, education, or political party. The gender imbalance I document in often invisible forms of cognitive household labor has important implications for politics. Women, but not men, report lower levels of political interest as their mental load increases. These findings suggest the enduring relevance of the household

³According to data from the OECD, 68 percent of women aged 15 – 64 are employed in the United States, compared to 79 percent of men, as of 2021 (LFS by sex and age - indicators).

division of labor to equality in political life. They point to increasing men's participation in not just physical but also cognitive household labor – particularly in those routine, non-discretionary tasks traditionally done by women, such as child care and cleaning – as an essential part of closing gender gaps in political engagement.

Gender, the Mental Load, and Political Interest

Women continue to do the bulk of household labor across nearly every context in the world. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), globally women spend between two and ten times more time on unpaid care work than men. These gender gaps narrow with women's education and employment, and when the gender wage gap is relatively smaller (Ferrant, Pesando & Nowacka 2014; Iversen & Rosenbluth 2010). According to household bargaining theories, when women have greater outside options they have more negotiating power at home, and men begin to take on some of the physical household work (Iversen & Rosenbluth 2010).

The same dynamics might not hold for gender gaps in cognitive household labor. While gender gaps in physical household labor decrease with women's relative income (e.g., Fuwa 2004), I do not expect the gender gap in the mental load to similarly decline with education or income. This is because cognitive labor is harder to outsource than physical household labor, and it does not require women's physical presence in the home. Instead, it can always be in the back of one's mind. Even very affluent families with full-time child care, cleaning and other household help require someone to manage all of the services and the day-to-day schedules of family members – most often, the mother (Sherman 2017).

In addition, the rise of intensive mothering has affected middle and upper class women in particular (Hays 1996). This dominant paradigm suggests that 'good' mothers

ought to be highly involved in all aspects of their children’s lives, but the same social pressures are not placed on fathers (Damaske 2013). Women but not men are socialized to be the ones ultimately responsible for family life – and they are likely judged by their peers if they do not adhere to these norms (Thébaud, Kornrich & Ruppner 2021).

The main expectations about the gender gap in the mental load are thus that the gender gap is large – women having on average higher “mental loads” than men – and that this gap persists across socio-economic characteristics, such as income or education. I also expect the gender gap in cognitive labor to be larger than the gender gap in physical household labor, for the reasons previously outlined but also because of the invisible nature of such work. As Daminger (2019) explains, cognitive labor is “diffuse, disjointed, and often invisible even to the doer” (p. 9). This could make it more difficult to identify and reallocate within households than physical labor, even if partners want to.

Shouldering the majority of the mental load is likely to have important consequences in various aspects of women’s lives. It could “crowd out” mental space for other activities such as leisure and hobbies, engaging with political life, or employment-related tasks. The notion of “bounded rationality” holds that individuals have only limited (bounded) knowledge and computational capacity, and therefore must be selective in searching for information (Simon 1956). Similarly, cognitive load theory suggests that humans have limited working memory, and so there are constraints on how much new information individuals can register and use in conscious activities (Miller 1956; Plass, Moreno & Brünken 2010). In order to avoid cognitive overload, individuals that take on more cognitive load related to the household might choose to take on less related to other tasks, like taking an interest in politics.

Gender-based inequalities in the division of household labor could leave women with less time and fewer opportunities to engage with politics. Yet, no existing studies link household labor to political interest or participation directly. Burns, Schlozman, and

Verba (1997; 2002) find no link between the percentage of housework done and political activity for men or women; however, having more leisure time is associated with greater participation for men. Other studies show that becoming a parent and the presence of young children affect mothers and fathers in contradictory ways. Analysis of political engagement in 27 European countries finds that gender differences in political interest are largest among couples with children (Quaranta & Dotti Sani 2018). Having a child is associated with less voting frequency for women but not men (Voorpostel & Coffé 2012). Even becoming pregnant leads to significant declines in women’s levels of political participation, but this is not true for their partners, expectant fathers (Naurin, Stolle & Markstedt 2022).

The dampening effect of parenthood for women in particular is also seen at higher levels of political participation, like running for office. For example, mothers with bread-winning responsibility, who despite this still tend to undertake more housework than their partners, are especially unlikely to run for office (Bernhard, Shames & Teele 2021). Women are also less likely to run for office when it would entail longer commuting time, further constraining the time they have available for household and care responsibilities (Silbermann et al. 2015). This makes sense; while the majority of people believe women are better at multitasking (Szameitat et al. 2015), research shows that there is no female advantage. Everyone is bad at multi-tasking (Hirnstain, Larøi & Laloyaux 2019). At the same time, voters prefer women candidates with children to women candidates without children; women candidates thus face a double bind (Teele, Kalla & Rosenbluth 2018). In summary, household inequality can bleed into political inequality – but so far the ways in which the gendered division of household labor impacts political interest, the earliest stage of participation, are unclear.

In the current study, I concentrate on how cognitive household labor might condition gender gaps in political interest. Like cognitive household labor, political interest is

more of a mental state than a physical act. If the mental load affects individuals' engagement with political life, I would expect to observe it first in feelings about wanting to learn about and understand politics. Taking an interest in politics is an important first step that sets the stage for further political engagement and participation. For example, in their study of gender differences in political engagement, Verba, Burns, and Schlozman find that, "differences in political knowledge, efficacy, and interest play a decisive role in explaining the small disparity between women and men in political participation" (Verba, Burns & Schlozman 1997, 1059).

Previous studies investigating the determinants of political interest find consistent gender gaps (men being more interested in politics than women) in samples from the U.S. and most European countries (Bennett & Bennett 1989; Burns, Schlozman & Verba 2002; Fraile & Gomez 2017; Fraile & Sánchez-Vítores 2020; Hayes & Bean 1993; Norris, Lovenduski & Campbell 2004; Preece 2016; Verba, Burns & Schlozman 1997). However, these gender gaps typically do not persist when considering interest in local political issues, as opposed to national or international issues (Campbell & Winters 2008; Coffé 2013; Hayes & Bean 1993). This might be because women's greater involvement in household tasks and care work gives them more exposure to certain kinds of local politics, like schools and local health issues. Similarly, when asked about specific political issues, women are more likely to bring up social issues and gender-related concerns (e.g., gender pay gap, gender-based violence) compared to men; yet, men and women do not associate many of these issues with *general* political interest (Ferrín et al. 2020).⁴ With more of women's head space taken up by household management, it could be more difficult, and for some less rewarding, to follow political issues that are not perceived to be related to women's substantive interests, which

⁴For this reason some recommend changing the way that surveys ask about political interest, including a range of specific political issues of interest to men and women to combat the latent association between politics and masculinity (Tormos & Verge 2022).

are informed by their gendered daily experiences.

Because cognitive household labor is a relatively new concept, I find little previous evidence directly related to how it might affect men's and women's levels of political interest. However, in focus groups preceding the 2005 British national election Campbell and Winters (2008) report that several women mentioned "the responsibility of child-rearing" as a reason why they do not keep up with politics, whereas no men mentioned this issue (p. 55). Interestingly, these participants specifically brought up mental work related to care: one said, "I think after two kids my brain kind of goes funny. I swear you know I've lost half of it," and another said, "I felt that when I had children and they were young I just really had no time to think about anything else" (p. 71). These remarks are consistent with the idea that cognitive overload related to household and care can prevent some individuals from taking an interest in politics. While previous studies have perceived household constraints mainly in terms of time spent in physical household labor, I propose that gender differences in household cognitive labor also matter.

My main expectations about political interest are thus that women with large mental loads are less likely to be interested in politics, especially national and international political issues. This relationship could occur through mediation (if the mental load explains the process through which gender impacts political interest) or moderation (if the impact of gender on political interest varies depending on the mental load), and I test both potential pathways in the analysis below.

An Original Survey on Politics and Household Work

In order to understand the role of the mental load in politics, the first step is measuring it. No existing research measures the mental load quantitatively. This type of labor is not captured

well by time-use studies which ask respondents to indicate how much time in minutes they spend on different tasks in the day, because the planning and monitoring that goes into managing a household are often secondary or tertiary activities (e.g., adding to the grocery list while at work). To make progress on this, I fielded an original survey to 1,528 respondents who are parents of children aged 0-12 (below high school age) in the United States. The survey targets parents of children below and of primary school age. While the mental load endures throughout the life course (Dean, Churchill & Ruppner 2022), this labor naturally compounds when there are dependent children to be cared for. Unlike previous work which tends to focus only on different-sex couples, the sample includes men and women from same- and different-sex couples, as well as single parents.

The survey was fielded in April and May of 2022 via Prolific, an online platform which recruits respondents mainly via social media. Studies find that Prolific offers higher data quality than MTurk and other platforms on participant honesty, diversity, and ability to target demographics via prescreening (Palan & Schitter 2018; Peer et al. 2017). Respondents were paid \$2.20 per completed survey, which translates into an hourly rate of \$11.05, above the minimum wage and considered high by Prolific’s ethical rewards standards. Previous research suggests that respondents in convenience samples such as this one are motivated by earning extra money, and that respondents agree that the level of data quality (e.g., willingness to remain attentive) provided depends on their perceptions of compensation fairness (Lovett et al. 2018). Thus, the relatively high reward matters for both ethical and data quality reasons.

Table 1 provides summary statistics. The sample was balanced on gender but otherwise it does not mirror the U.S. population, or the U.S. population of parents. In particular, it is better educated, more Democratic, and underrepresents non-white ethnic groups. It is important to acknowledge that external validity could be limited because of

Table 1: Summary Statistics for Prolific Sample

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Woman	1,491	0.499	0.500	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Higher education (B.A. & above)	1,528	0.609	0.488	0	0	1	1
Employed	1,528	0.743	0.437	0	0	1	1
Partner	1,528	0.859	0.348	0	1	1	1
Same-sex partner	1,520	0.036	0.185	0.000	0.000	0.000	1.000
Number of children	1,487	1.712	0.803	0.000	1.000	2.000	4.000
White	1,528	0.793	0.406	0	1	1	1
Black	1,528	0.065	0.246	0	0	0	1
Hispanic / Latino	1,528	0.082	0.274	0	0	0	1
Asian	1,528	0.037	0.190	0	0	0	1
Voted Democrat in 2020	1,528	0.563	0.496	0	0	1	1
Voted Republican in 2020	1,528	0.188	0.391	0	0	0	1

Notes: All survey respondents confirmed that they are parents of children ages 0 to 12. The minimum number of children is 0 because this question asked how many children ages 0 to 18 live with you, and four respondents said 0.

this.

The survey starts by asking respondents a series of questions about political engagement and participation. I ask the political questions first because questions about physical or cognitive household labor might prime gender and parenthood status, affecting responses to political questions in an undesirable way (Klar 2013). Conversely, I have little reason to suspect that answers to questions about physical and mental household labor will change based on respondents first seeing questions about political engagement.

After the questions about political engagement, I introduce the idea that household work can have physical and mental aspects: “People say that running a household typically involves both physical and mental types of work. For this set of questions we want you to think about the **physical** work involved in managing your household and caring for children, not the mental aspect.” I then ask respondents to estimate the hours they personally spend doing both 1) care work and 2) other types of household labor (cooking, cleaning, etc) on a typical weekday and weekend day.⁵ Respondents are likely to be more familiar with the idea of physical household labor than mental household labor, so I ask the physical labor questions first. I use these responses to calculate the estimated hours of physical household labor per week for each individual. These questions allow me to assess how gender differences in household physical labor compare to those in cognitive household labor. Additionally, after all the physical household labor questions I ask respondents to estimate the share of physical household labor that they personally do within their household, on a scale of 0 (none of it) to 100 (all of it).

⁵The question text reads: “On average, how many hours do you personally spend looking after family members (e.g. children, elderly, ill or disabled family members) for a typical weekday and a typical weekend day?” with sliders given for both weekday and weekend day, and, “On average, how many hours do you personally spend on household work (such as cooking, cleaning, or shopping), for a typical weekday and a typical weekend day? If you sometimes do household work while looking after family members, count it here if you consider the main activity you were doing to be household work,” with sliders given for both weekday and weekend day.

Next I instruct respondents, “Now think about the **mental** work involved in managing your household and caring for children, not the physical aspect.” To measure the mental load, I use a strategy that builds on previous qualitative research describing the cycle of cognitive labor in the household: anticipating needs, identifying options and making decisions, and monitoring progress (Daminger 2019).⁶ The questionnaire asks a series of task-oriented questions that correspond with each of these three components, for eight different types of cognitive household labor: scheduling, child care, social relationships, cleaning, coronavirus, food, finances, and home maintenance (24 items in total).⁷ These categories are not exhaustive, but represent the majority of the nine cognitive labor domains identified as applying to most couples in previous interview-based research (Daminger 2019).⁸ Respondents are asked, “In your family, who typically handles” each task, with a range of options given: “Mostly me”, “Mostly my partner”, “Partner and I share equally”, “Someone else (Includes friends and family)”, and “NA”. For example, the questions related to scheduling ask respondents who in their household typically handles the following: Remembering to schedule appointments, such as dentist appointments (*anticipating*); Planning a family event, like a birthday party (*identifying options and making decisions*); and Keeping track of the family calendar, such as kids’ medical appointments (*monitoring*).⁹

I then construct a composite measure of the mental load for each person, which can be broken down by category. I sum the total number of items that an individual claims is done by “Mostly me” and divide this number by the number of items within each category and overall (removing those items that respondents say are not applicable from the denomi-

⁶While Daminger (2019) identifies four main components of cognitive household labor (where identifying options and making decisions are separate components), I collapse these to three for the sake of survey length.

⁷I randomly vary the order of the eight types of cognitive household labor.

⁸I leave out “shopping/purchasing” and “travel/leisure” from Daminger’s (2019) domains, and add a domain for mental work related to the coronavirus pandemic.

⁹See Appendix A for the full list of mental task survey items.

nator).¹⁰ The advantage of using the ‘mostly me’ response to operationalize the mental load, without including work reported as shared, is that it provides a straightforward measure of (perceived) individual responsibility for different types of cognitive labor. Cronbach’s Alpha of the scale items is 0.925, indicating excellent internal consistency.

From this I derive the average self-reported mental load done by men and women (absolute task measures), and the gender gap (relative task measures). A similar approach has been found to be effective at measuring issue preferences (Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder 2008). The basic idea is that multiple measures – here of different aspects of the mental load, which mirror accounts of the most relevant categories from qualitative studies – reduce measurement error. This is the main methodological contribution of the study. In addition, after all the cognitive labor task questions I ask respondents to estimate their share of the mental load (“Considering all the mental work to take care of your household, about how much of this work is done by you as opposed to someone else?”). I use this estimate as a validation check on my task-based measure of the mental load.

Describing the Mental Load among U.S. Parents

My expectation is that the mental load is highly gendered, with women socialized to take on much more of the cognitive labor necessary to manage their households than men. I begin by providing evidence to support this contention. Figure 1 shows the distribution of household labor that is reportedly done by “mostly me” for both men (red) and women (blue) respondents. The left panel presents data from the item-based index of the mental load (the share of relevant tasks that is reportedly done by “mostly me”, across all eight

¹⁰The average number of “not applicable” responses among the 24 items was 1, suggesting that the vast majority of items were relevant to respondents. The item with the most “not applicable” responses (22%) is related to coronavirus, “keeping track of any home schooling / online learning activities” (See Appendix B).

categories) and the right panel presents the estimates that respondents gave about how much of the mental work in their household is done by me as opposed to someone else.

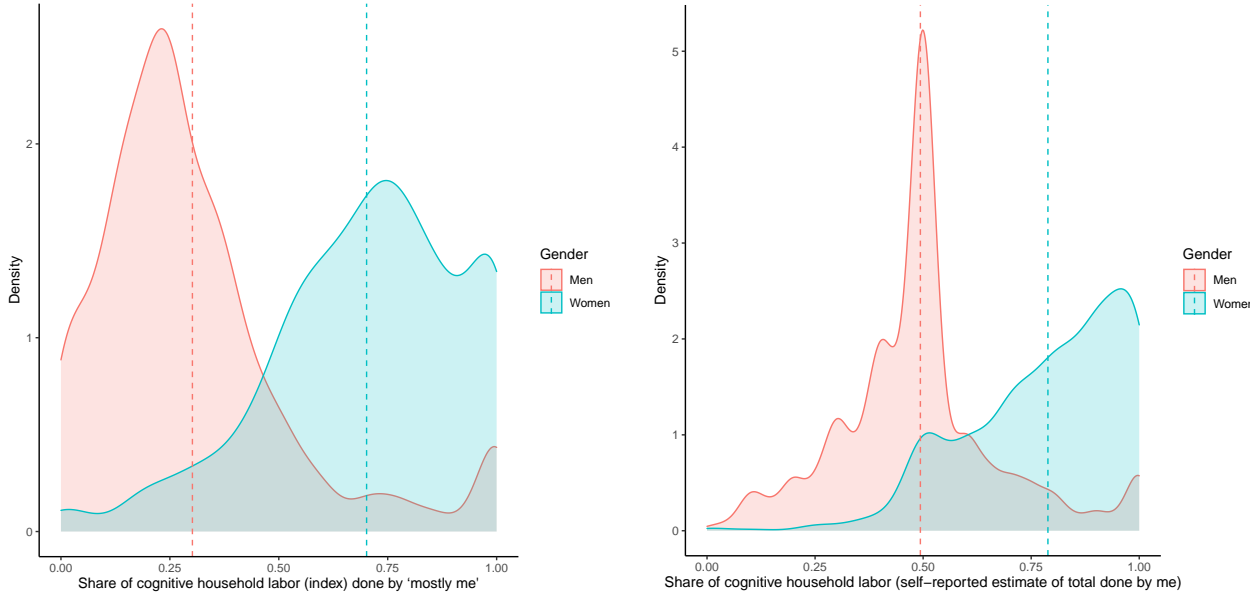


Figure 1: Gender differences in mental household labor

Both ways of measuring the mental load show large gender gaps. Women report doing 70 percent of the mental load while men say that they are mostly responsible for 30 percent of it, using the task-based index (40 percent gap). I note that while men’s and women’s average self-reported mental loads sum to 100, this should not suggest perfect alignment between men and women on who does the cognitive labor of the household. The data comes from individuals rather than couples, so the estimates do not reflect what men and women in the same couples do. In addition, recall that the task-based measure is an average of the work that individuals say is done by ‘mostly me’, and does not include the other options such as share equally. Appendix B presents figures showing the reported distribution for each mental load task by gender across all answer options, and the figures

show considerable misalignment between men and women on some tasks. For example, the majority of both men and women claim it is mostly them that keeps track of household expenses. Including the ‘share equally’ option, average mental loads for men and women total over 100%, suggesting potential bias in reporting by either men or women (or both). Such bias is already well-established in studies of physical household labor, where results suggest that men tend to overestimate their own contributions (or women underestimate men’s contributions) (Kamo 2000; Fuwa & Cohen 2007; Lee & Waite 2005).

Using the self-reported estimates, both men and women say that they do more of the mental work than the index finds, although the increase is much larger for men. Women estimate doing 79 percent of the mental work in their households, while men estimate doing 49 percent (30 percent gap). T-tests show the gender differences measured in both the task-based and self-reported estimates are statistically significant. Of course, without somehow observing the mental load directly it is hard to distinguish which measure is more accurate. However, it is reassuring that the two measures (task-based index and estimate) are highly correlated, with a Pearson’s correlation coefficient of 0.81. The index has the advantage of asking respondents about specific tasks, rather than relying on respondents to remember all of the mental work they do as in the estimate. Because of this I rely on the task-based data for the remainder of the paper.

How do gender gaps in cognitive household labor compare to gender gaps in physical household labor? Figure 2 shows the mean share of hours that men and women say that they do in both household labor and care work combined, per week (left panel), and their estimates about how much of the physical labor to take care of their households is done by them as opposed to someone else (right panel). As expected, significant gender differences emerge – but they are smaller than the gender gaps in cognitive household labor. Considering time spent in household work alone, women say that they do 27 hours per week while men

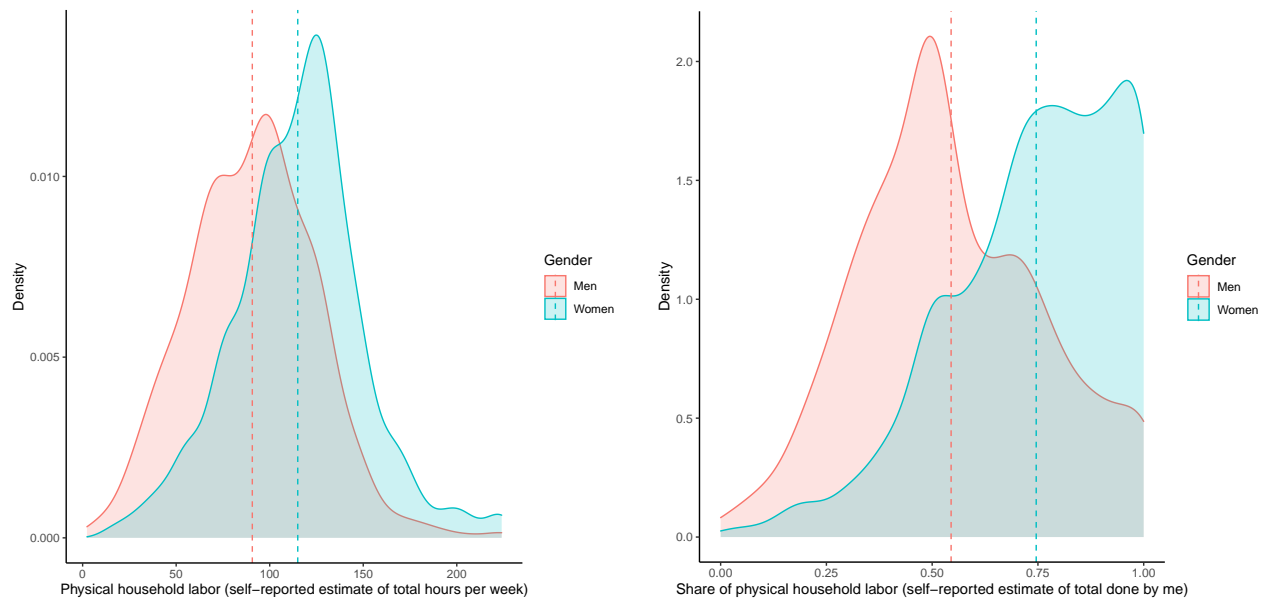


Figure 2: Gender differences in physical household labor

report doing 19 hours. The estimates for care work are 88 hours per week for women and 72 for men. Overall this translates into a gender gap of 3.4 hours per day, 14 percent of time spent in household physical labor.¹¹ The right panel shows that women estimate that they do 75 percent of the physical labor in their households, while men estimate that they do 55 percent (20 percent gap). In summary, gender gaps in physical household labor do not appear as large as gender gaps in cognitive household labor.

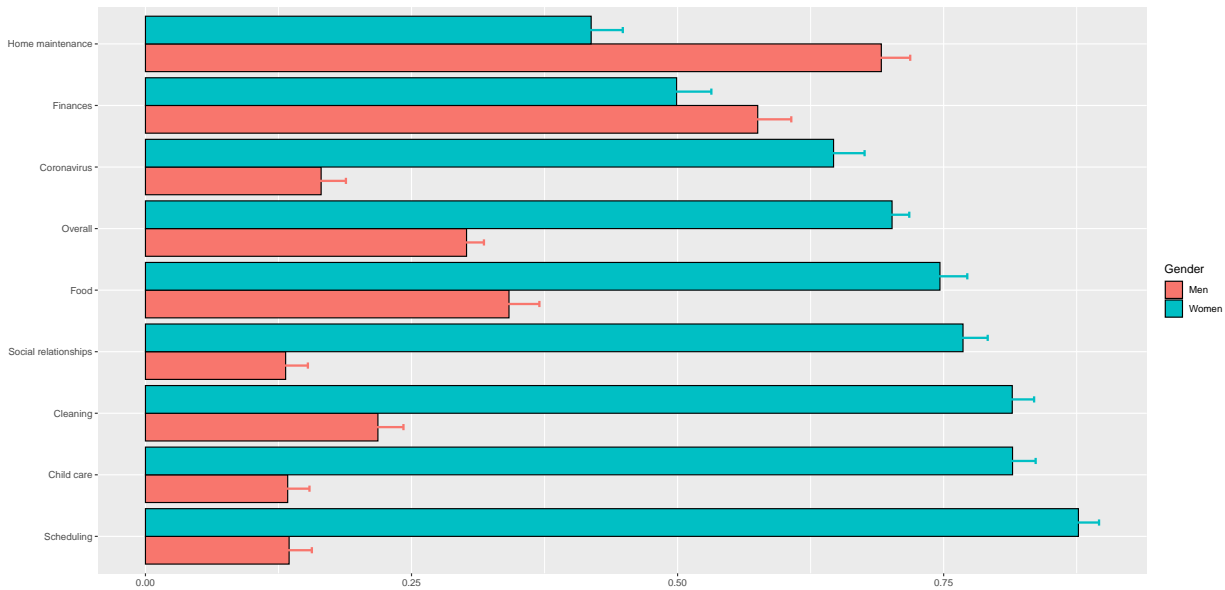


Figure 3: Reported Responsibility for Cognitive Household Labor Tasks by Gender

Notes: Mean share of men and women reporting that cognitive household labor tasks are done by 'mostly me' as opposed to someone else, by gender. 95% confidence intervals (CIs) from t-tests. Data include 1490 respondents.

Figure 3 maps men's and women's responsibility for the mental load across different

¹¹While there are only 168 hours in a week, the maximum estimated hours spent doing household and care labor combined is higher than this in the left panel of Figure 2. This is because the overall physical household work measure combines separate questions about time spent doing care versus household work. Before questions about time spent doing household work, respondents are told, "If you sometimes do household work while looking after family members, count it here if you consider the main activity you were doing to be household work." Still, some respondents either over-report their total time doing care or household labor as the main activity, or do not distinguish the main activity. However, similar findings maintain when examining the separate care and household labor estimates. The estimated gender differences I report are somewhat larger than other studies based on the general population. For example, OECD time use data finds that in the United States women spend 271 minutes per day in unpaid labor, while men spend 166 minutes – a difference of 1 hour and 45 minutes (ages 15 – 64 included; data come from the 2019 American Time Use Survey). These differences could be related to my sample, which includes only parents with young children, or differences in how the data are collected.

types of cognitive tasks. The figure shows that while women report doing the majority of most tasks, gender differences are especially pronounced for mental work related to scheduling, child care, and cleaning. Examples include planning a family event (*scheduling*) noticing when children’s nails need to be cut (*child care*), and keeping track of when sheets and towels need to be washed (*cleaning*). Women report that they are the ones mostly responsible for 88 percent, 81 percent, and 81 percent of these tasks, respectively. Women also report that they are mostly responsible for 65 percent of mental work related to the coronavirus pandemic (including keeping track of online learning and checking in with family and friends that might need help), while men say that they are the ones mostly responsible for only 17 percent of this work. This adds new evidence that the pandemic increased mothers’ workloads not just physically but in terms of their mental load as well.

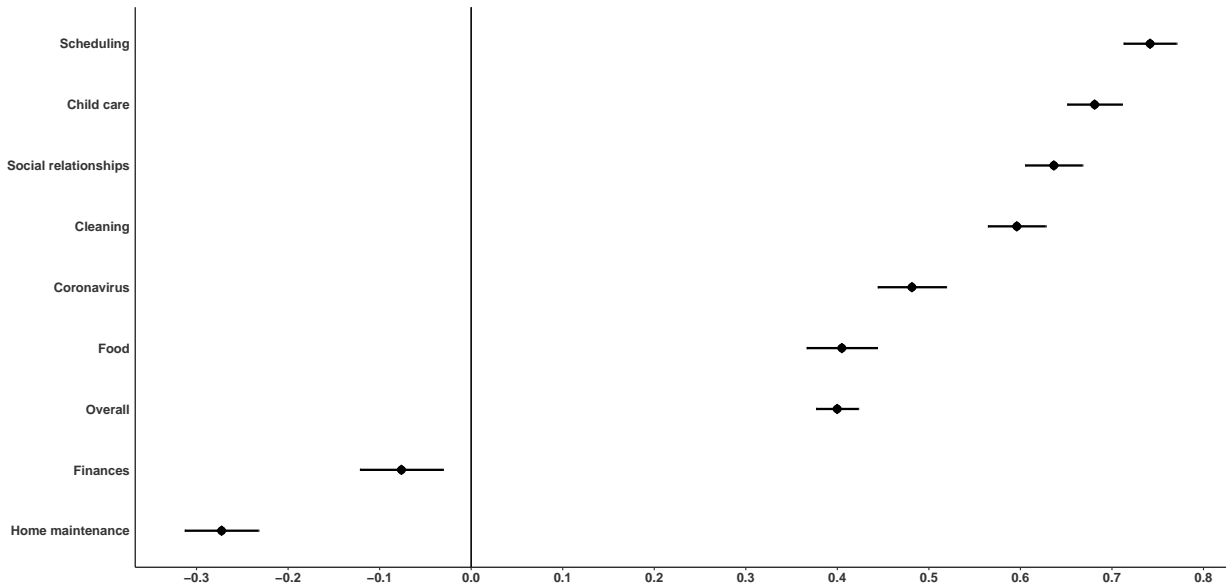


Figure 4: Gender Gaps in Reported Responsibility for Different Cognitive Household Labor Tasks

Notes: Mean differences in reporting that cognitive household labor tasks are done by 'mostly me' as opposed to someone else, by gender (share women minus share men). 95% confidence intervals from Welch two-sample t-tests. Data include 1490 respondents.

Conversely, men report that they are the ones mostly responsible for mental work related to home maintenance (mostly responsible for 69 percent of this work). The questions

here relate to noticing when an item needs repair, booking a repair professional like a plumber or mechanic, and remembering when items like a boiler or car need servicing. Mental work related to finances (including deciding how to allocate money and keeping track of household expenses) is the most gender-balanced, although men report higher levels of responsibility compared to women. Figure 4 summarizes the gender gaps in mental work (share of work women say they are mostly responsible for minus share of work men say they are mostly responsible for) by category.

Next, I look at how the gender gap in the mental load overall varies by relevant socioeconomic and household characteristics. As Figure 5 shows, mental work within households is mostly done by women in almost every context I consider. The exception is couple households where women but not men are employed. Here, women still report doing more of the mental load than men, but this gender gap of 9 percentage points is not significant (I note the small N of 42 for this sub-sample). The figure also demonstrates that gender gaps in the mental load are smaller among households where women outearn men: the gap narrows to 31 percentage points here, compared to 40 percentage points in households where men outearn women. Finally, gender gaps are also smaller among respondents who identify as Asian (30 percentage points, N=57),¹² and among those of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (27 percentage points, N=125).

Gender gaps in cognitive household labor are especially large in households with 3 or more children (gap of 47 percentage points, N=221) and households where men but not women are employed (gap of 50 percentage points, N=258). As expected, the figure shows little variation across income levels or education.¹³ I also observe little variation across party

¹²Includes Asian Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese.

¹³Income is measured as individual annual salary (including bonuses and commissions) in U.S. dollars; “low” is less than \$50,000, “medium” is \$50,000-\$100,000, and “high” is greater than \$100,000. Higher education is a binary variable coded as 1 if completed Bachelor’s degree or higher, and 0 otherwise.

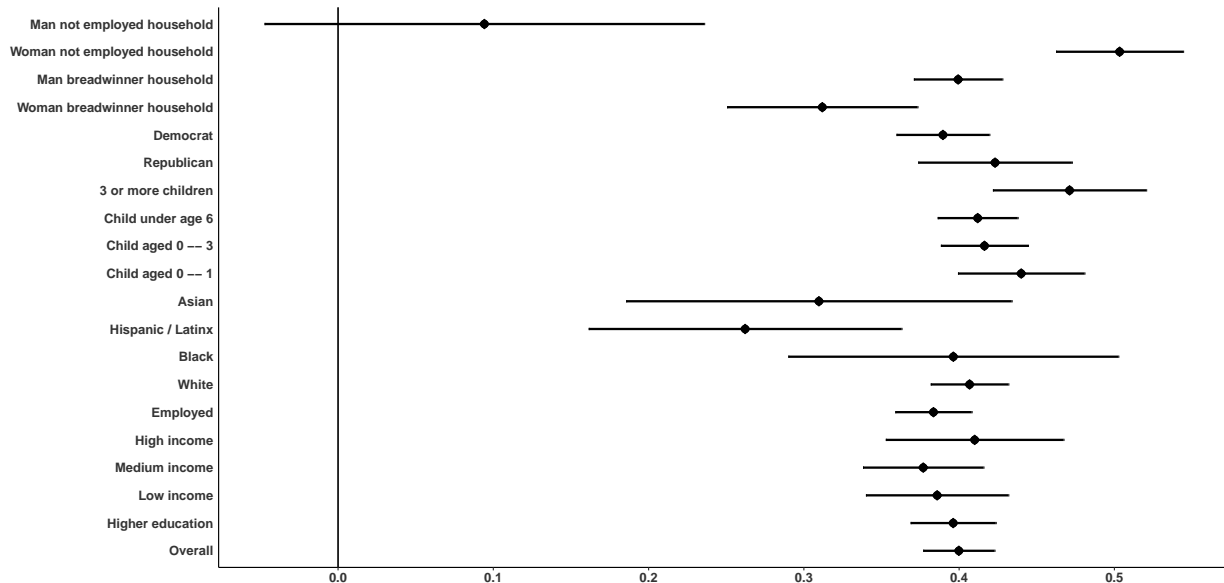


Figure 5: Gender Gaps in Reported Responsibility for Cognitive Household Labor, by Group

Notes: Mean differences in reporting that cognitive household labor tasks are done by 'mostly me' as opposed to someone else, by gender (share women minus share men). 95% confidence intervals from Welch two-sample t-tests. Data include 1490 respondents overall, with the N varying across different sub-samples of the data.

as measured by reported vote (voted for Biden versus Trump in 2020). The consistency of the gender gap in household cognitive labor across multiple different groups and contexts provides some reassurance about the potential external validity of my findings. Although the sample is not representative of all U.S. parents, because similar patterns are observed across income levels, education, and political party I would expect to see similar results in a sample that mirrors the population of U.S. parents more accurately.

My survey also offers some evidence on the mental load among single parents (defined as having no spouse or steady partner), which is very large compared to the average of 70 percent for women and 30 percent for men in the sample of all parents. Single women say that they take on 93 percent of the mental load in their households (N=82), while single men say that they take on 78 percent (N=41). I also offer some initial evidence on the mental load among same-sex couples, although I note my sample size is small. Respondents with a same-sex partner have lower mental loads than the average, with women in same-

sex partnerships claiming to do 55 percent of the mental load (N=36), and men in same-sex partnerships reporting a very low 25 percent of the mental load (N=18). While this evidence should be confirmed with a larger sample, it is in line with previous research suggesting that women in same-sex partnerships will on average have lower mental loads than women in different-sex partnerships (Doan & Quadlin 2019).¹⁴

The mental load conditions the link between gender and political interest

To describe and compare average gender gaps in different types of political interest, I estimate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions separately for interest in local, national, and international political issues. This question reads, “How interested would you say you personally are in the following types of political issues”, with respondents asked to respond to separate question items for “Local”, “National”, and “International” issues. The response options are “Not at all interested”, “Not very interested”, “Fairly interested”, and “Very interested”. For ease of interpretation, I rescale all political interest variables to range between 0 and 1, where higher values refer to greater interest. However, I note that the findings I report here are robust to models that use ordered logistic regression instead of OLS.¹⁵

To measure baseline gender gaps in political interest, I deliberately do not control for other covariates such as employment, education, or income because these can all be considered “post-treatment”, occurring after gender identity is “assigned” (Sen & Wasow 2016). Figure 6 presents the gender differences in mean interest. It shows that women

¹⁴While I would also like to consider the level of the mental load among non-binary respondents, only 10 respondents answered “Other / prefer not to answer” to the gender question, with a further 27 respondents selecting no option.

¹⁵To save space, results available from the author.

tend to have less interest in politics than men, although this gender gap is not statistically significant for international political issues (where interest tends to be lower than for other types of politics among both men and women).

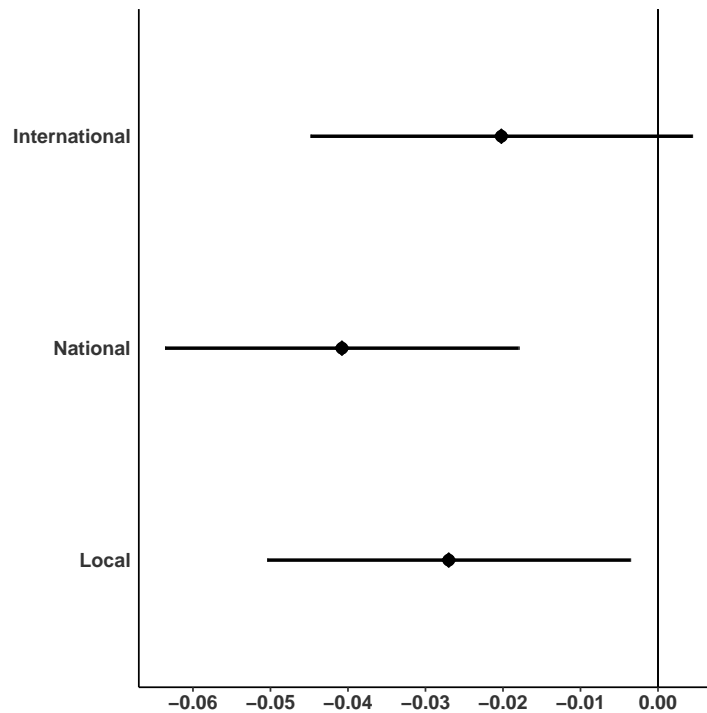


Figure 6: Impact of Gender (Woman) on Interest in Political Issues Among U.S. Parents

Notes: Coefficients from OLS Analysis with 95% CIs. N=1490.

How does the mental load relate to gender differences in political interest? My main expectation is that when women have high levels of cognitive labor, they will be less interested in politics. Table 2 presents models regressing political interest on gender and share of the mental load. For each type of political interest (local, national, and international), I first specify an additive model, then an interactive model, and finally an interactive model including relevant covariates. The additive models (Models 1, 4, and 7) show that the mental load does not mediate the relationship between gender and political interest. The coefficients on gender do not decrease on adding the mental load variable, as we would expect if the relationship between gender and political interest is driven by the mechanism of cognitive

labor (Baron & Kenny 1986). Compared to the bivariate OLS results shown in Figure 6, the coefficients for gender are similar in size (in fact, gender gaps become larger for local issues), and remain significant for the same types of political interest, local and national.¹⁶

¹⁶Causal mediation analysis using the potential outcomes framework (Imai, Keele & Tingley 2010), similarly, shows no evidence that the mental load mediates the effect of gender on political interest.

Table 2: Determinants of Interest in Local, National and International Political Issues

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Local			National			International		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Woman	-0.041** (0.016)	0.022 (0.031)	0.018 (0.032)	-0.042*** (0.016)	0.022 (0.030)	0.003 (0.031)	-0.025 (0.017)	0.076** (0.033)	0.062* (0.034)
Mental load	0.034 (0.026)	0.095** (0.037)	0.117*** (0.042)	0.002 (0.026)	0.064* (0.036)	0.104** (0.041)	0.011 (0.028)	0.109*** (0.039)	0.106** (0.044)
Woman x Mental Load		-0.124** (0.053)	-0.106* (0.054)		-0.126** (0.051)	-0.105** (0.052)		-0.200*** (0.055)	-0.172*** (0.056)
No. children			-0.005 (0.008)			-0.0002 (0.008)			-0.006 (0.008)
Child < 3			-0.016 (0.013)			-0.001 (0.012)			0.010 (0.013)
% physical HH labor			0.022 (0.034)			-0.036 (0.032)			-0.036 (0.035)
Low income			-0.014 (0.019)			0.009 (0.018)			0.055*** (0.020)
Medium income			-0.005 (0.017)			0.005 (0.016)			0.045** (0.018)
Higher ed			0.018 (0.014)			0.003 (0.014)			0.005 (0.015)
Employed			0.044* (0.026)			0.002 (0.025)			-0.003 (0.027)
Partner			0.020 (0.031)			0.048 (0.030)			-0.010 (0.033)
Democrat			0.051*** (0.013)			0.097*** (0.012)			0.115*** (0.013)
Black			-0.005 (0.025)			-0.029 (0.024)			-0.054** (0.026)

Asian			-0.015 (0.031)			-0.036 (0.030)			0.012 (0.033)
Hispanic / Latino			-0.007 (0.022)			0.014 (0.021)			0.022 (0.023)
Constant	0.739*** (0.012)	0.720*** (0.014)	0.623*** (0.039)	0.775*** (0.011)	0.756*** (0.014)	0.654*** (0.037)	0.650*** (0.012)	0.621*** (0.015)	0.551*** (0.040)
Observations	1,490	1,490	1,391	1,490	1,490	1,391	1,490	1,490	1,391
R ²	0.005	0.008	0.035	0.008	0.012	0.067	0.002	0.011	0.072
Adjusted R ²	0.003	0.006	0.024	0.007	0.010	0.057	0.001	0.009	0.062

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Next I explore whether the mental load moderates the relationship between gender and political interest, with women less interested in politics at higher levels of the mental load. The idea here is that rather than the mental load explaining the process through which gender is related to political issues (as a mediator), it could affect the strength of the relationship between gender and political interest (as a moderator). Given the different distribution of the mental load by gender in my sample (more women grouped at the high end, and more men at the low end of the spectrum), I follow the recommendations of Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu (2019). This approach includes diagnostics for common support of the moderator (mental load) across the range of the data for men and women. Figure C1 in the Appendix shows the linear interaction diagnostic plots. These indicate that conditional relationships for both men and women are reasonably approximated by a linear fit – the raw data show negative relationships between mental load and political interest for women, and, interestingly, the opposite for men. Additionally, the plots demonstrate common support to compute treatment effects across the range of approximately 0.3 to 0.85 of the moderator (mental load).

As Table 2 shows, I find evidence consistent with the moderation theory. The specifications show statistically significant interactive effects of gender and the mental load in the expected negative direction across all types of political interest, with and without controlling for relevant covariates. In specifications 3, 6, and 9 I control for a battery of characteristics that previous studies suggest could impact political interest: the number of children in a household, having a child less than 3 years old, employment, income, higher education, having a partner that lives in the same household, voting Democrat, and ethnic identity (Bennett & Bennett 1989; Coffé 2013; Verba, Burns & Schlozman 1997). I also control for the self-estimated share of physical household labor the individual does. The interactive findings hold with the inclusion of these individual and household-context control variables. Additional models in the Appendix (Table C1) show the results for interest in

national and international politics are robust to specifications including interactions with gender and all covariates.

My results show little evidence that physical household labor depresses interest in politics for women. It is not a significant predictor of political interest in additive or interactive models. This in line with other research on participation which, despite strong theoretical expectations, “could find no evidence that absence of free time handicaps women as citizens” (Burns, Schlozman & Verba 1997, 384, see also Burns, Schlozman & Verba 2002). Yet, when measuring household inequality as cognitive rather than physical labor, this changes. When women, but not men, take on high levels of the mental load, they are less likely to report interest in different types of politics. Measuring the mental load thus helps unpack the longstanding puzzle of gender differences in psychological engagement with politics.

To aid the interpretation of this moderation story, Figure 7 shows marginal effect plots generated using a kernel smoothing estimator, with all controls shown in Table 2 models 3, 6, and 9 included (Hainmueller, Mummolo & Xu 2019). This method estimates a series of local effects with a kernel reweighting scheme, where confidence intervals are generated using 1,000 iterations of a nonparametric bootstrap. Stacked histograms at the bottom of the plot show common support based on the distribution of the moderator across respondent gender. The three bars compare treatment effects at three values of the moderator, set approximately at the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentile of the data.

The figures show that the “effect” of being a woman on interest in politics is negative and significant when the individual has a relatively high mental load. This significant effect emerges for levels of mental load of 34 percent or higher (national issues), 42 percent or higher (local issues), and 68 percent or higher (international issues). The confidence intervals are large, which likely reflects limited common support particularly toward the limits given less

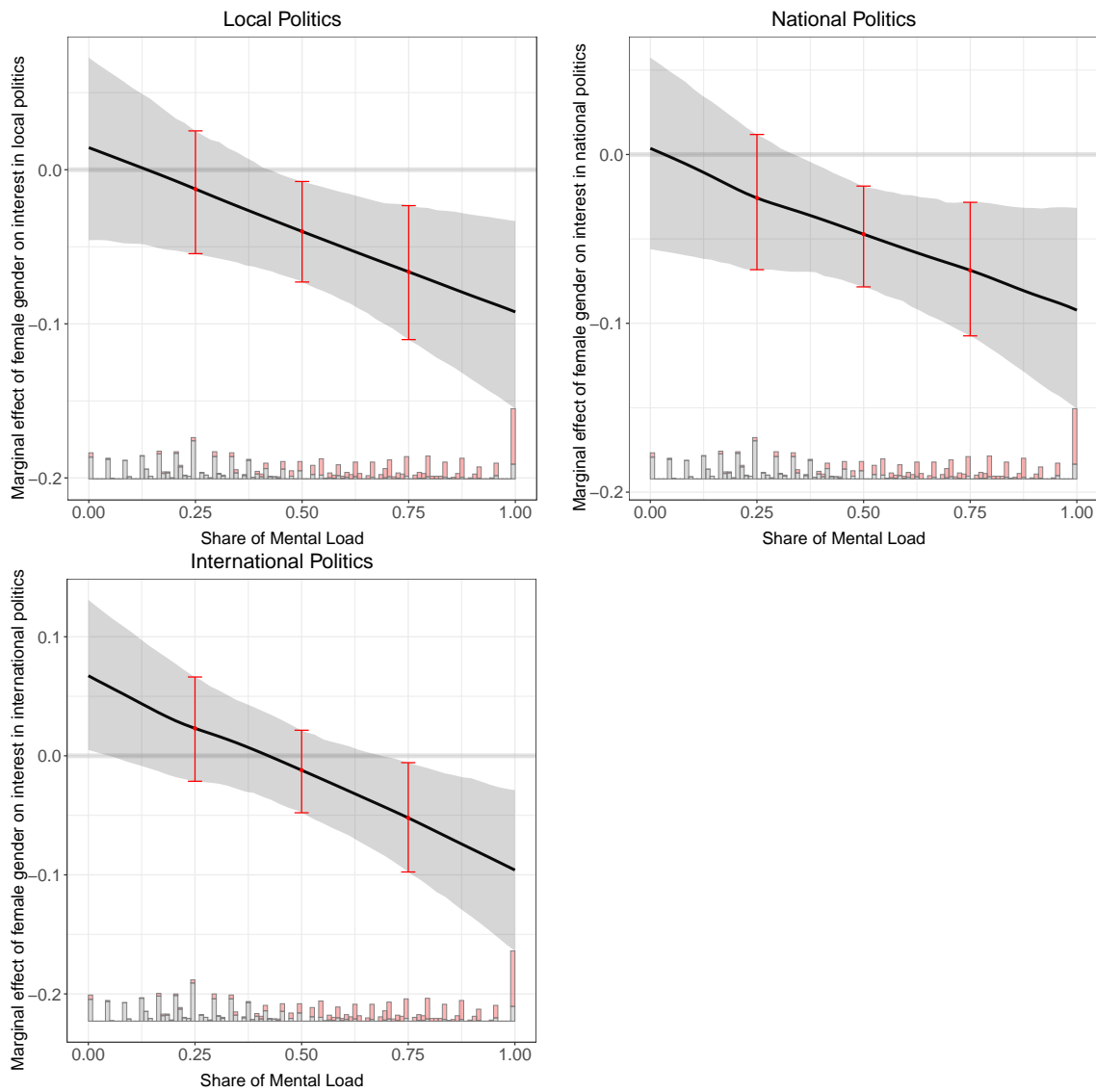


Figure 7: Marginal Effects of Gender on Political Interest by Share of Mental Load, Kernel Estimator

The plots show the estimated marginal effects using a kernel smoothing estimator, including covariates shown in Table 2, Models 3, 6, and 9. 95% confidence intervals are shown, along with a rug plot along the x-axis.

data from men and women simultaneously at these points. However, the figure shows there is sufficient common support to estimate the marginal effects and they display the expected trends. Comparing the effect of gender at high versus low values of the mental load (0.75 vs. 0.25), the difference is negative and statistically significant for local and international politics at conventional levels, and for national politics at the 0.1 level.¹⁷

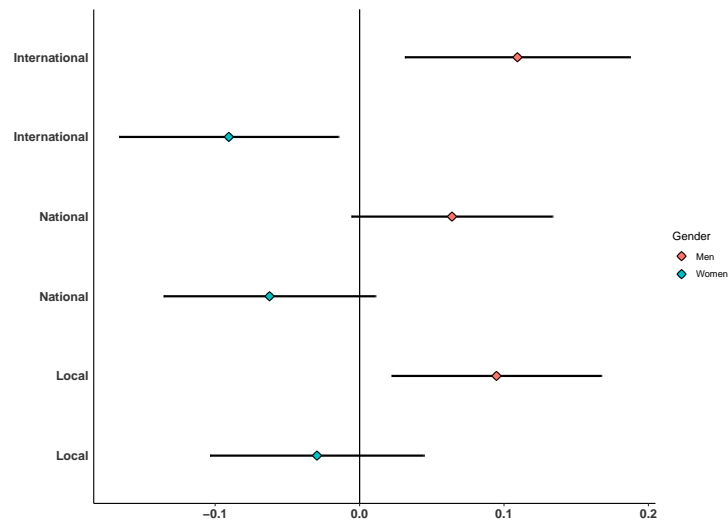


Figure 8: Impact of Mental Load on Interest in Political Issues Among U.S. Parents, by Gender

Notes: Coefficients from OLS Analysis with 95% CIs. The sample for women includes 744 respondents, and the sample for men includes 747 respondents.

This finding is also confirmed by regressing the mental load on political interest within the sub-samples of men and women separately. While the mental load is negatively linked to interest in national and international politics for women (this relationship is significant at the 0.1 level for interest in national issues, and at the .05 level for interest in international issues), the opposite is found for men (mental load significant at conventional levels for interest local and international issues, and at the 0.1 level for national issues).

Figure 8 summarizes the findings of these bivariate OLS regressions. In summary, my initial

¹⁷The differences are as follows: local politics, difference = -0.054, SD = 0.026, p-value = 0.038; national politics, difference = -0.043, SD = 0.025, p-value = 0.090; international politics, difference = -0.075, SD = 0.028, p-value = 0.008.

findings show that, among parents, the mental load decreases political interest for women while increasing it for men.

Why does the mental load affect political interest differently for men and women?

As expected, high levels of the mental load depress political interest for women. However, the finding that men express *higher* levels of political interest as their mental load increases was not expected. This suggests that the mechanism cannot be mental bandwidth alone; if this were true, large mental loads ought to decrease political interest for both men and women. In this section I offer initial evidence related to two potential explanations for this: satisfaction with the mental load and the composition of the mental load. One possibility is that the mental load affects men's and women's psychologies differently. Perhaps women, who on average take on the bulk of mental work while often working outside the home as well, are more dissatisfied about high mental loads compared to men. A study of household labor in seven European countries confirms that high mental loads (measured using three questions about household tasks in the Generations & Gender Survey) increase exhaustion levels for women especially (Haupt & Gelbgiserb 2022). If women are more likely to resent cognitive household work as their levels go up compared to men, this dissatisfaction could bleed into appetite for politics as well. Research shows that individuals who are more satisfied with their lives are more likely turn out to vote and participate in other political activities, although these studies do not investigate political interest as an outcome (Flavin & Keane 2012; Ward 2020).

I find little evidence to support this explanation. The survey asks questions about how satisfied respondents are with the division of physical and mental labor in their house-

hold. The results show that most women but not men are dissatisfied with the cognitive labor division in particular. While 69 percent of men say that they are extremely or somewhat satisfied with the division of mental work in their household, only 36 percent of women say the same. This gender gap is about ten percentage points larger than gender differences in satisfaction with the division of physical work in households, where 46 percent of women are satisfied versus 68 percent of men.¹⁸ However, levels of satisfaction with the division of cognitive household labor are not significantly related to interest in politics for women or men, ruling this out as a potential mediator (Baron & Kenny 1986; see Appendix Table C2 for results).

Second, the mental load's differential effects on interest for men and women could be related to the different types of mental work that men and women tend to take on. Recall from Figures 3 and 4 that while women say that they take on the majority of most categories of cognitive household labor, the majority of men say that they are mostly responsible only for tasks related to home maintenance and finances. Women, conversely, undertake the vast majority of mental tasks related to scheduling, child care, social relationships, and cleaning. In other words, men and women who say that they are mostly responsible for, for instance, 60% of cognitive labor in their household, might still be specializing in different mental tasks. They might do the same overall share of mental work for the household, but the type of work they do is different. This matters if some types of cognitive tasks encourage political engagement (or at least do not deter it), and others do not.

Table 3 presents the average reported responsibility for each category of the mental load by gender and overall share of the mental load. I calculate means in bands, from 30–39% of the mental load to 60–70% (falling within the range of good common support in the data). The table shows that even those men who report taking on a relatively high share

¹⁸Chi-squared tests find that both gender gaps are significant at conventional levels.

Table 3: Mean share of mental load categories, by gender and overall share of mental load respondents report being mostly responsible for

Gender	Category	Overall share of mental load mostly responsible for:							
		(30-39%)		(40-49%)		(50-59%)		(60-70%)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Women	Child care	0.370	0.333	0.535	0.313	0.715	0.287	0.873	0.232
Men	Child care	0.075	0.145	0.167	0.265	0.276	0.322	0.426	0.353
Women	Cleaning	0.635	0.298	0.625	0.327	0.706	0.265	0.791	0.273
Men	Cleaning	0.256	0.295	0.313	0.338	0.472	0.421	0.630	0.360
Women	Coronavirus	0.200	0.253	0.234	0.264	0.354	0.323	0.606	0.368
Men	Coronavirus	0.084	0.195	0.196	0.285	0.504	0.409	0.667	0.318
Women	Finances	0.167	0.305	0.264	0.407	0.217	0.351	0.331	0.412
Men	Finances	0.774	0.379	0.823	0.325	0.764	0.359	0.870	0.283
Women	Food	0.354	0.368	0.347	0.364	0.647	0.349	0.714	0.332
Men	Food	0.443	0.377	0.641	0.355	0.683	0.401	0.778	0.280
Women	Home maintenance	0.083	0.169	0.104	0.208	0.173	0.248	0.233	0.308
Men	Home maintenance	0.850	0.254	0.885	0.234	0.931	0.144	0.963	0.108
Women	Scheduling	0.500	0.379	0.785	0.279	0.851	0.254	0.905	0.223
Men	Scheduling	0.093	0.209	0.205	0.274	0.321	0.373	0.537	0.382
Women	Social relationships	0.333	0.328	0.517	0.348	0.629	0.316	0.812	0.237
Men	Social relationships	0.074	0.182	0.141	0.252	0.276	0.372	0.370	0.377

Notes: The number of respondents for each overall share of the mental load grouping is as follows: 30-39%, 158 men and 32 women; 40-49%, 65 men and 48 women; 50-59%, 41 men and 103 women; 60-70%, 18 men and 148 women.

of the mental load overall, 50 – 60%, say they are mostly responsible for only 28% of child care tasks, 32% of scheduling and 47% of cleaning, while claiming responsibility for 76% of mental work related to finances and 93% for home maintenance. Conversely, women who say that they are mostly responsible for 50–60% of the mental load overall report being mostly responsible for 72% of child care, 85% of scheduling, and 71% of cleaning, while doing 22% of mental work related to finances and 17% for home maintenance. Thus, the composition of the mental load for men and women is different even for those reporting the same overall share of work, broadly matching the gender-based specialization well-established in previous studies of physical household work (e.g., Blair & Lichter 1991).

Having established that men and women engage in different types of mental labor as their overall level of cognitive household work increases, Table 4 investigates how each of the eight categories of mental work is related to political interest for women (columns 1 to 3) and men (columns 4 to 6). The table shows that some types of work tend to depress political interest for both men and women; namely, mental work related to child care (significantly related to decreased interest in international politics for men, and negative across all models) and cleaning (also negative across all models, and significantly related to decreased interest in international politics for women and local politics for men). These types of mental tasks are probably among the most prevalent, occurring on a daily basis “without a well-defined beginning or end” (Blair 2013, 614), and as such they are likely to be repetitive and mentally taxing (Lennon & Rosenfield 1994). They are mostly done by women.

Other types of mental work tend to be positively related to political interest for men and women, such as maintaining social relationships (positively linked to interest in national politics for women, and local politics for men). This fits well with previous research, which argues that the development of social ties to others is at the very heart of political engagement (Flanagan 2003).

Table 4: Mental Load Categories as Determinants of Political Interest for Women and Men

	Women			Men		
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Local	Nat'l	Int'l	Local	Nat'l	Int'l
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mental load child care	-0.020 (0.038)	-0.026 (0.038)	-0.047 (0.040)	-0.061 (0.050)	-0.070 (0.048)	-0.092* (0.054)
Mental load cleaning	-0.047 (0.037)	-0.028 (0.037)	-0.074* (0.038)	-0.055* (0.033)	-0.033 (0.032)	-0.014 (0.036)
Mental load covid	-0.002 (0.029)	-0.023 (0.028)	-0.006 (0.030)	-0.0004 (0.041)	0.022 (0.040)	-0.008 (0.044)
Mental load finances	0.003 (0.021)	-0.020 (0.021)	-0.028 (0.022)	0.024 (0.021)	0.002 (0.020)	0.0002 (0.023)
Mental load food	0.053* (0.028)	-0.028 (0.028)	-0.023 (0.029)	0.073*** (0.025)	0.047* (0.024)	0.075*** (0.027)
Mental load home main.	-0.020 (0.025)	-0.024 (0.024)	0.026 (0.026)	0.044* (0.025)	0.039* (0.024)	0.016 (0.027)
Mental load scheduling	-0.001 (0.039)	0.030 (0.038)	0.023 (0.040)	-0.012 (0.043)	0.027 (0.041)	0.043 (0.047)
Mental load social	-0.010 (0.036)	0.061* (0.036)	0.028 (0.038)	0.083* (0.046)	0.026 (0.045)	0.082 (0.050)
Constant	0.759*** (0.035)	0.764*** (0.035)	0.715*** (0.036)	0.691*** (0.019)	0.738*** (0.018)	0.619*** (0.021)
Observations	717	717	717	728	728	728
R ²	0.008	0.015	0.016	0.030	0.016	0.025
Adjusted R ²	-0.003	0.004	0.005	0.019	0.005	0.014

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Finally, some types of cognitive household labor affect men and women differently. Mental work related to home maintenance is positively linked to interest in local and national politics for men but not women. While men express more interest in all types of politics at high levels of mental work related to food, this relationship is only observed for local politics for women. Both home maintenance like repairs or home improvements and food-related tasks such as meal planning have more of a leisure component to them, making them less boring options compared to, e.g., cleaning.

Mental work related to food is one area that men engage with more as their overall mental loads increase (Table 3), a finding that tracks with other research showing that men have increasingly taken on more domestic food responsibilities over time (Kan, Sullivan & Gershuny 2011; Szabo 2013). The rise of celebrity chefs has perhaps contributed to this type of household work being seen as more interesting and more masculine in recent years (Hollows 2003). In one interview-based study from Sweden, men emphasized especially the social values of everyday meal preparation, as a way to contribute to the household “as part of a desirable masculinity (loyal friend, responsible father, good husband or boyfriend, etc.)” (Neuman, Gottzén & Fjellström 2017, 827). While women have other mental and time pressures due to day-to-day care and household obligations, men might experience this activity as more of a mix between work and leisure due to their relative distance from these other obligations (Szabo 2013). Thus, it is possible that for men in the US, too, household work related to food takes on a social role, values that then translate into broader political engagement as well.

Further research is needed to unpack the process through which different types of cognitive household labor are linked to social and political engagement for men and women. For example, qualitative, interview- or focus group-based studies would shed valuable light on how men and women experience doing different types of cognitive household work, the

values they place on this work, and how they see this aspect of their everyday lives related to broader engagement with the political community.

Conclusion

Despite major advances in women's access to education and employment over recent decades, women still take on a "second shift" in unpaid labor in the home (Hochschild & Machung 2012). The contribution of this study is to begin to measure the cognitive element of this household labor and its political consequences. This study is among the first to measure absolute and relative cognitive household labor in a quantitative way. I find large and consistent gender gaps among U.S. parents, in the order of 40 percent, with women on average claiming to be mostly responsible for 70 percent of cognitive household labor while men report responsibility for 30 percent. These gender gaps are twice as large as those found for physical household labor, where women report doing 75 percent of labor and men report doing 55 percent (20 percent gap). Previous time-use studies which include some element of cognitive household labor (for example, asking respondents to estimate the time spent in mental labor related to the household) find smaller gender gaps, on par with gender gaps in physical household labor (Lee & Waite 2005; Offer & Schneider 2011). As Daminger (2019) points out, this is likely because it is very hard to estimate the *time* spent doing this kind of diffuse mental work which goes on throughout the day. My task-based measure of the mental load affirms the qualitative findings that women take on the vast majority of such work (Damingler 2019, 2020).

The gender gaps I identify in who does the mental work of managing the home and family persist across a wide variety of household and individual characteristics, including income, education, and political party. Examining how the mental load relates to political

interest among U.S. parents, I find that higher levels of the mental load decrease levels of political interest for women, while the opposite occurs for men. The subsample analysis of women respondents demonstrates that the mental load impacts especially on women's interest in national and international issues, in line with previous studies which suggest that women connect more with local issues (Campbell & Winters 2008; Coffé 2013; Hayes & Bean 1993). Indeed, gathering information on local issues related to schools and health could easily make up part of the mental load of caring for family members. Men and women also specialize in different types of mental work even at relatively high levels. Women take on more of the day-to-day, non-discretionary tasks like child care and cleaning, which tend to have more negative impacts on political interest. The implication of this finding is that, if men took on more cognitive household labor – particularly labor related to those routine tasks often seen as boring like child care and cleaning – and women's share of the mental load subsequently decreased, gender gaps in political interest would decline as a result.

While the mental load involves an aspect of emotional labor – for example, in anticipating and monitoring the emotions of children and the family as a whole (Dean, Churchill & Ruppanner 2022), the survey analyzed in this study measures mainly the cognitive labor aspect. It is thus important for future studies to consider whether and how we can render the emotional aspect of the mental load more visible. The large gender gap in levels of satisfaction with the division of cognitive household labor suggests that the burden of this work could cause distress, anxiety, and ultimately poorer well-being for women.

Future comparative work could shed light on to what extent the mental load (and gender gap in the mental load) varies across countries and welfare state systems. Do generous state policies like shared parental leave, paternity leave, and subsidized child care reduce these gender gaps, or not? Recent research suggesting that direct exposure to paternity leave can increase fathers' participation in household work (Patnaik 2019) and increase

gender-egalitarian norms among both mothers and fathers (Tavits et al. 2022) offer promising evidence that such policies could make a difference. What about labor markets that encourage part-time working for both men and women, such as the Netherlands? What are the national- and individual-level conditions under which men and women take on cognitive household labor equally, and does this translate into more political equality as well? There is much room for this exciting new research agenda uncovering hidden cognitive labor gender gaps, and pinpointing solutions to close them.

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Appendix

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A Question Items Composing the Task-Based Measure of the Mental Load

After answering questions about politics and physical household labor, respondents are told the following:

“Now think about the **mental work** involved in managing your household and caring for children, not the physical aspect.

You will see a series of 8 questions which ask about some different aspects of household and care work. **Please respond who in our household (yourself or someone else) typically handles this kind of mental work.**”

The response options given are: “Mostly me”, “Mostly my partner”, “Partner and I share equally”, “Someone else (Includes friends and family)”, and “NA”. The eight categories shown below were randomly varied.

Care for children: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Researching options for new items children need, like school supplies or shoes
- Deciding on a child care provider (e.g., babysitter, daycare, camp)
- Noticing when children’s nails need to be cut

Cleaning: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Keeping track of when sheets and towels need to be washed
- Cleaning out kids’ clothes that no longer fit
- Noticing when the house needs to be tidied

Coronavirus: In your household, who typically does the following?

For this question, please consider who mainly handled the activity anytime since March of 2020.

- Keeping track of any home schooling or online learning activities
- Deciding whether children should go back to daycare / school in person or online
- Checking in with family and friends who might need help during the pandemic

Finances: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Researching options for financial products like bank accounts or insurance
- Deciding how to allocate money (such as paying off credit cards or increasing savings)
- Keeping track of household expenses

Food: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Keeping track of which groceries need to be purchased
- Deciding what meals to cook
- Monitoring food for “sell-by” dates, or noticing when foods need to be thrown away

Home maintenance: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Noticing when something like a dishwasher or faucet needs repair
- Booking a repair professional like a plumber or mechanic
- Remembering when items like a boiler or car need servicing

Social relationships: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Finding social options for children’s enrichment (sports classes, clubs, etc)
- Coordinating a playdate

- Checking in with family and friends

Scheduling: In your household, who typically does the following?

- Keeping track of the family calendar, such as kids' medical appointments
- Planning a family event, like a birthday party
- Remembering to schedule appointments, such as dentist appointments

B Reported Distribution of Mental Load by Gender for All Items Composing the Task-Based Measure of the Mental Load

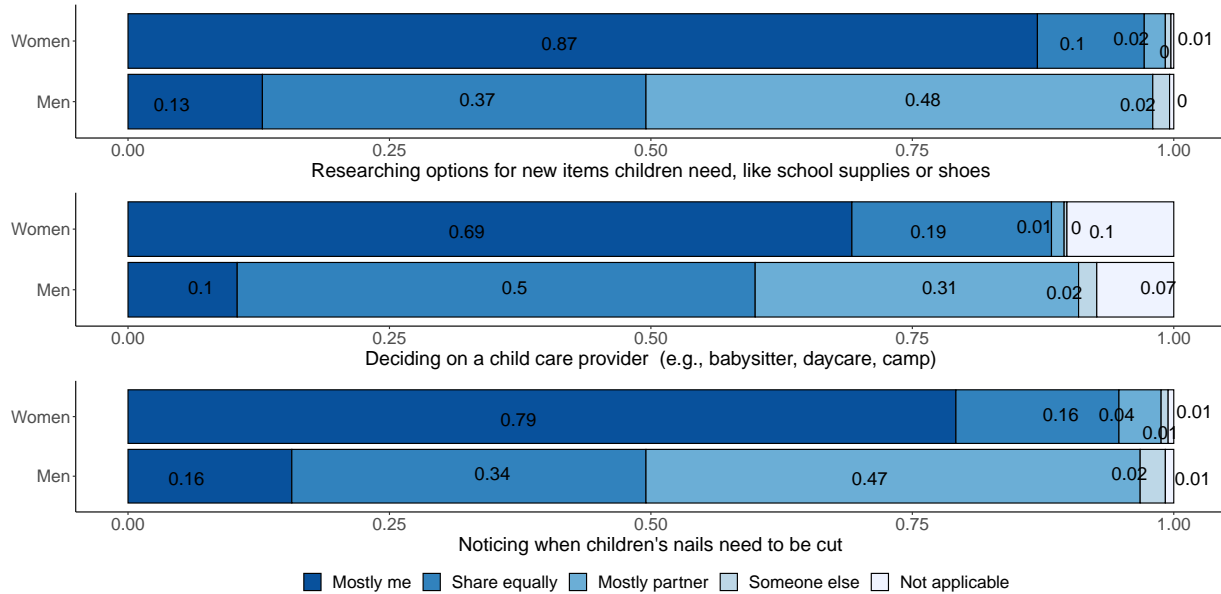


Figure B1: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Care for Children, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1491 respondents.

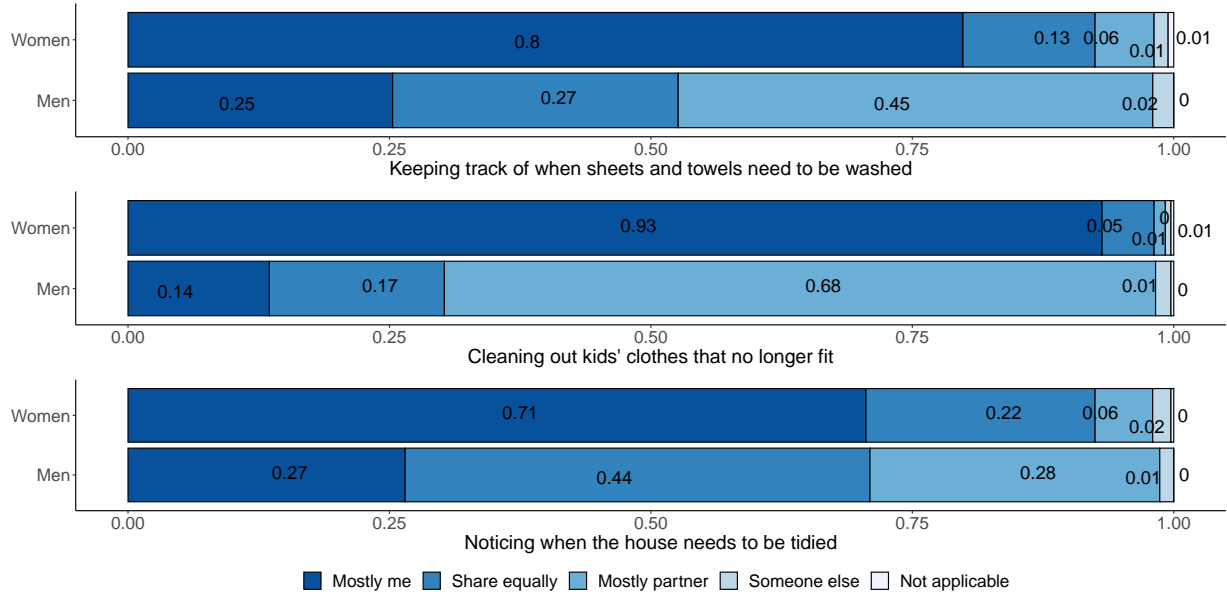


Figure B2: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Cleaning, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1490 respondents.

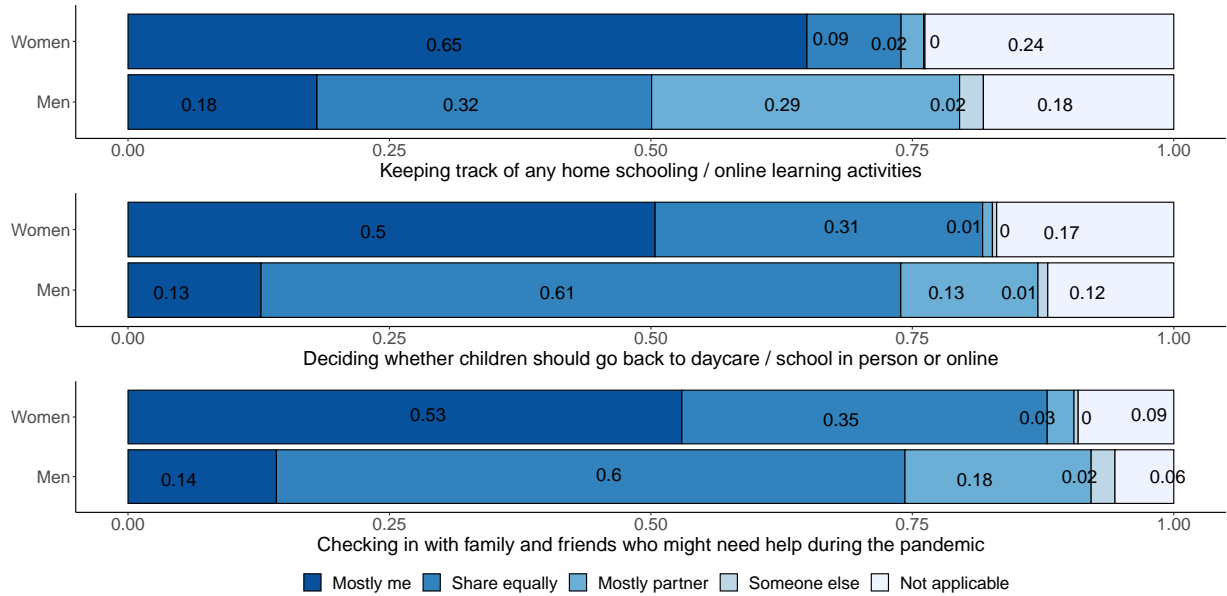


Figure B3: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Coronavirus, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following? For this question, please consider who mainly handled the activity anytime since March of 2020." Data include 1490 respondents.

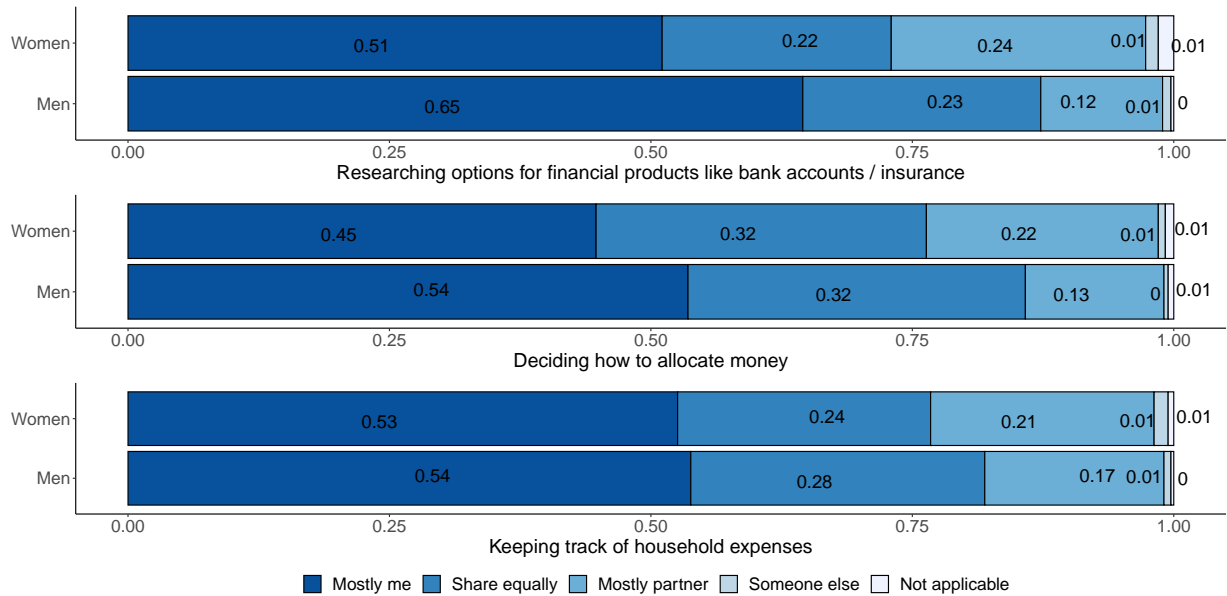


Figure B4: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Finances, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1490 respondents.

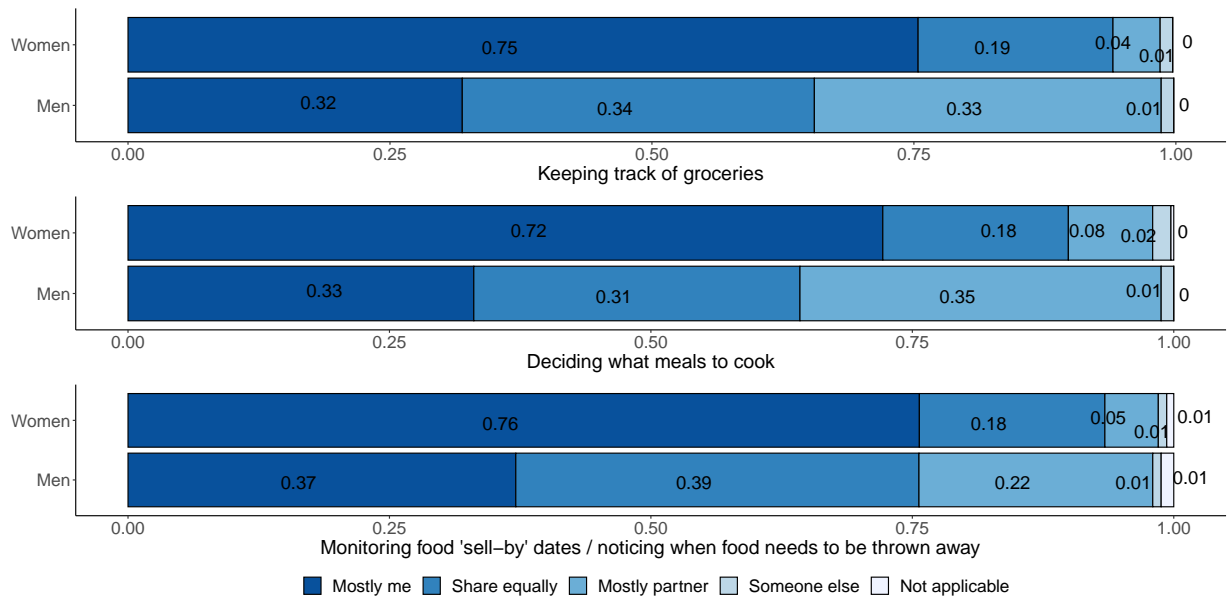


Figure B5: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Food, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1490 respondents.

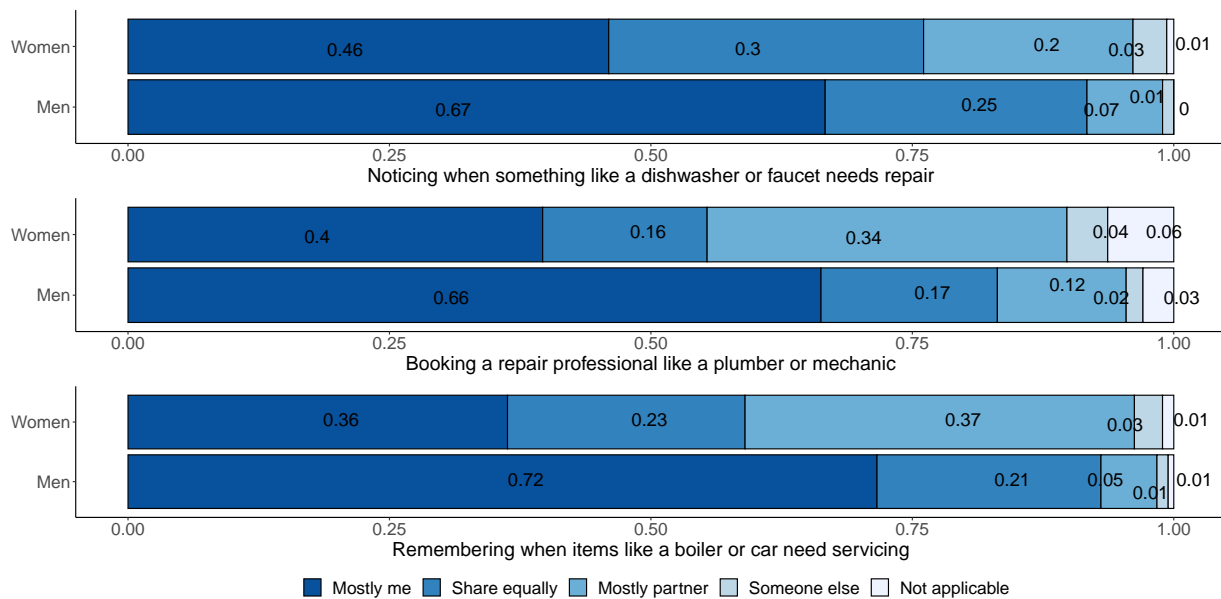


Figure B6: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Home Maintenance, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1490 respondents.

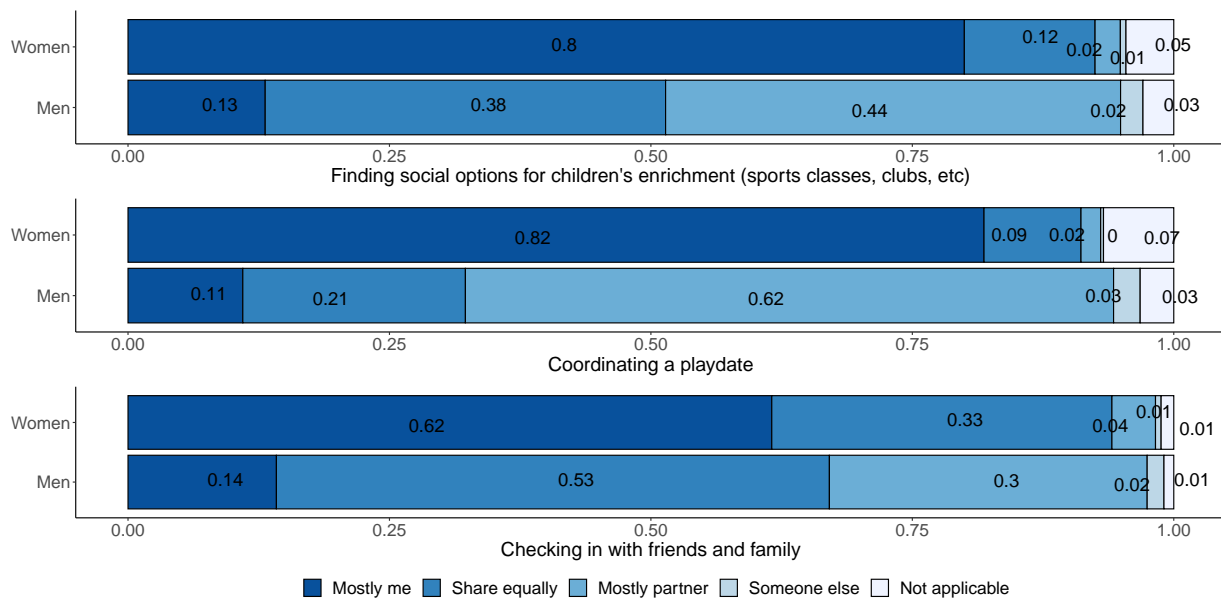


Figure B7: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Social Relationships, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1490 respondents.

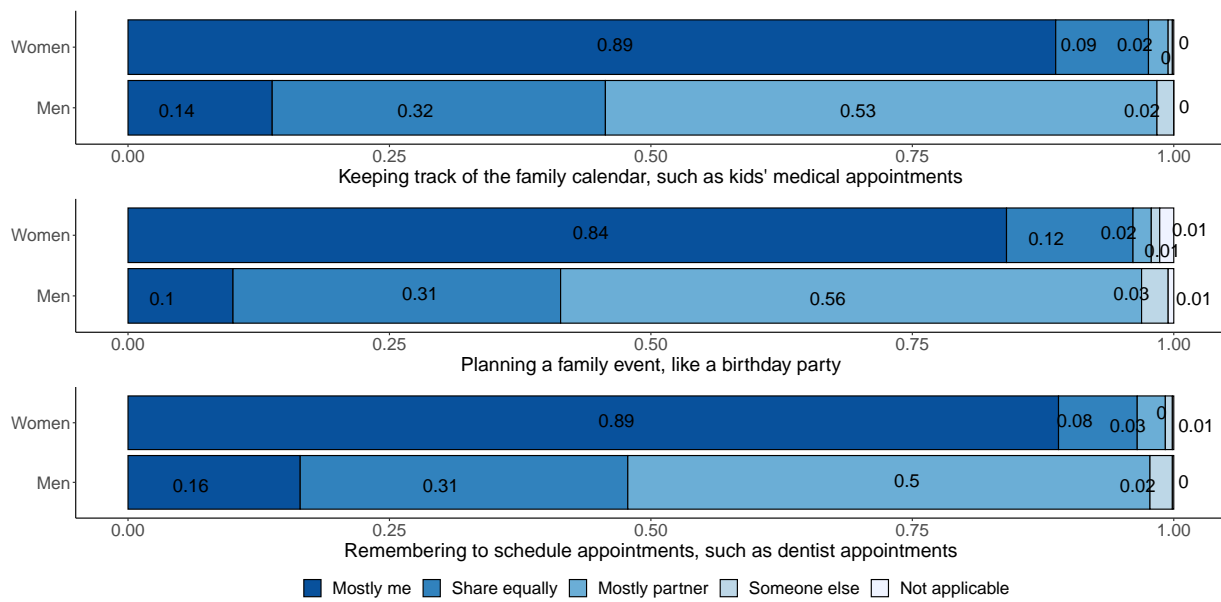


Figure B8: Reported Distribution of Cognitive Household Labor related to Scheduling, by Gender

Notes: The question text is, "In your household, who typically does the following?" Data include 1490 respondents.

C Diagnostic tests and additional specifications

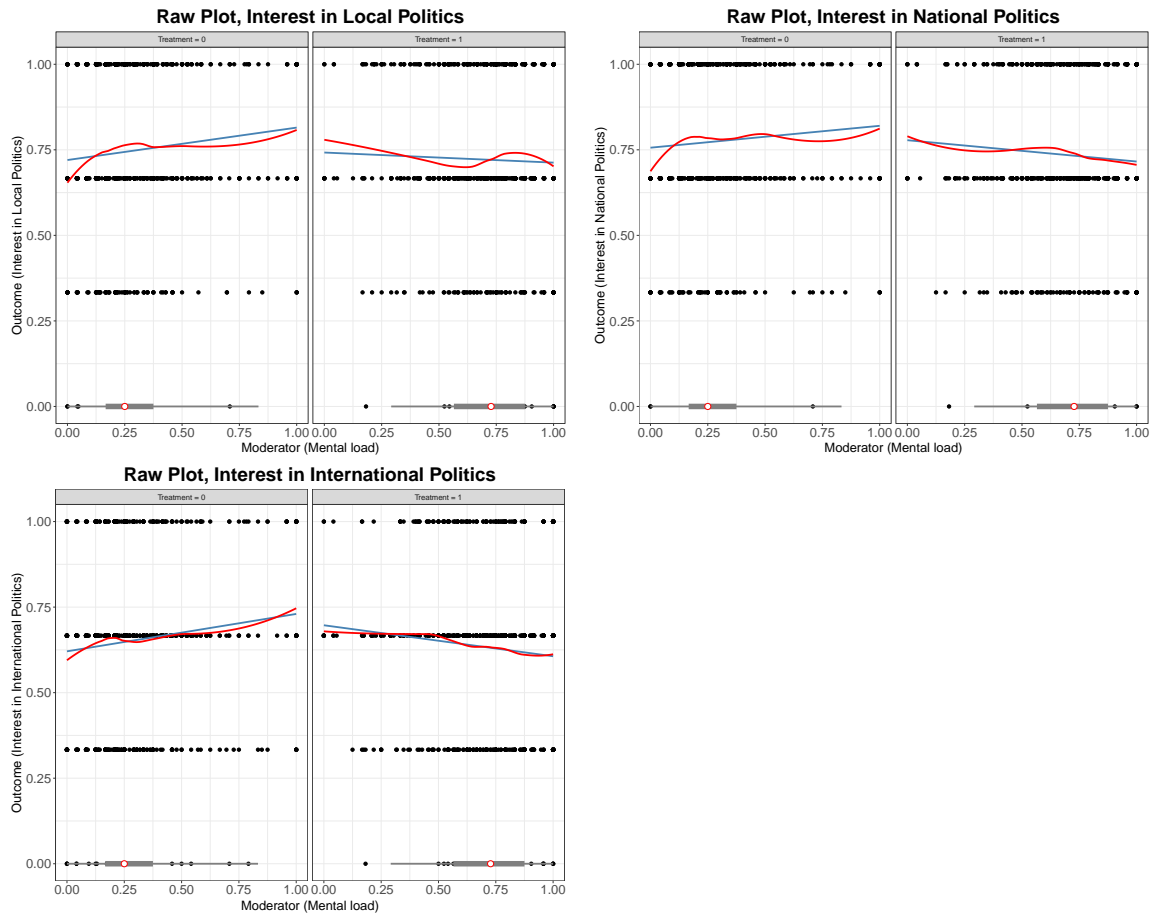


Figure C1: Linear Interaction Diagnostic Plots

The plots show the relationships among the “treatment” (1 = woman, 0 = man), the outcome (interest in local, national, and international politics), and the moderator (share of mental load respondent reports being mostly responsible for, task-based measure) using the raw data. The box plots at the bottom of the figures display quantiles of the moderator for men (left) and women (right). The dot in the center denotes the median, the end points of the thick bars denote the 25th and 75th percentiles, and the end points of the thin bars denote the 5th and 95th percentiles.

Table C1: Determinants of Interest in Politics, Including Interactions with Gender and All Controls

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Local	National	International
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Woman	-0.001 (0.084)	-0.029 (0.081)	0.146* (0.087)
Mental load	0.087* (0.047)	0.111** (0.046)	0.130*** (0.049)
Women x Mental load	-0.034 (0.069)	-0.136** (0.066)	-0.211*** (0.072)
% physical HH labor	0.065 (0.044)	-0.049 (0.043)	-0.012 (0.046)
Woman x % physical HH labor	-0.102 (0.069)	0.059 (0.066)	-0.041 (0.071)
No. children	0.001 (0.011)	0.001 (0.011)	-0.008 (0.012)
Woman x No. children	-0.013 (0.016)	-0.004 (0.015)	0.002 (0.017)
Child < 3	-0.008 (0.018)	0.009 (0.017)	0.010 (0.018)
Woman x Child < 3	-0.018 (0.026)	-0.023 (0.025)	-0.0003 (0.027)
Low income	-0.038 (0.026)	0.008 (0.025)	0.046* (0.027)
Woman x Low income	0.063 (0.040)	0.006 (0.039)	0.026 (0.042)
Medium income	-0.020 (0.021)	0.005 (0.020)	0.035 (0.022)
Woman x Medium income	0.050 (0.037)	-0.001 (0.035)	0.029 (0.038)
Higher ed	0.020 (0.021)	0.013 (0.020)	0.005 (0.022)
Woman x Higher ed	-0.005 (0.029)	-0.021 (0.028)	-0.004 (0.030)
Employed	0.090 (0.088)	0.148* (0.085)	0.002 (0.092)
Woman x Employed	-0.051 (0.092)	-0.156* (0.089)	-0.008 (0.096)
Partner	-0.049	-0.101	0.049

	(0.092)	(0.088)	(0.096)
Woman x Partner	0.087	0.170*	-0.091
	(0.099)	(0.095)	(0.103)
Democrat	0.047***	0.071***	0.085***
	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.019)
Woman x Democrat	0.010	0.058**	0.058**
	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.027)
Black	0.018	-0.023	-0.016
	(0.037)	(0.036)	(0.039)
Woman x Black	-0.041	-0.013	-0.077
	(0.050)	(0.048)	(0.052)
Asian	-0.035	-0.038	0.016
	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.038)
Woman x Asian	0.086	0.009	0.008
	(0.074)	(0.071)	(0.077)
Hispanic / Latino	0.005	0.052*	0.054*
	(0.030)	(0.029)	(0.032)
Woman x Hispanic / Latino	-0.026	-0.085**	-0.067
	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.046)
Constant	0.629***	0.662***	0.495***
	(0.056)	(0.054)	(0.058)
Observations	1,391	1,391	1,391
R ²	0.041	0.077	0.081
Adjusted R ²	0.022	0.059	0.063

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table C2: Dissatisfaction with the Mental Load and Interest in Politics

	Women			Men		
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Local	Nat'l	Int'l	Local	Nat'l	Int'l
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dissatisfaction w/ mental load	-0.001 (0.026)	0.019 (0.026)	0.021 (0.027)	-0.004 (0.008)	0.002 (0.008)	-0.003 (0.009)
Constant	0.722*** (0.016)	0.725*** (0.016)	0.622*** (0.017)	0.758*** (0.019)	0.771*** (0.018)	0.660*** (0.021)
Observations	744	744	744	747	747	747
R ²	0.00000	0.001	0.001	0.0004	0.0001	0.0002
Adjusted R ²	-0.001	-0.001	-0.0005	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Dissatisfaction with the mental load comes from the survey question, “How satisfied are you with the division of mental work in your household?”, which is coded so that higher levels represent more dissatisfied. The first three columns include women respondents, while columns 4 to 6 include men respondents.