

# Crowded Out: The Influence of Mental Load Priming on Intentions to Participate in Public Life<sup>\*†</sup>

Anna Helgøy<sup>‡</sup>

Ana Catalano Weeks<sup>§</sup>

November 17, 2023

## Abstract

How does cognitive household labor – the “mental load” involved in anticipating, fulfilling, and monitoring household needs – influence decisions about whether and how to participate in public life? Studies suggest women take on the vast majority of this load, yet the impact of these private sector inequalities on participation in public life is underexplored. To make progress on these questions, we contribute new causal evidence about the effect of prompting respondents to think about their own mental loads in a survey experiment fielded to employed British parents. Our main argument is that priming the mental load will crowd out interest in political and labor market participation. In line with expectations, our survey experiment finds a strong negative effect of mental load priming on intentions to engage in politics and at work. Our results offer new insights about the continuing relevance of household-based inequalities to gender equality in public life.

---

<sup>\*</sup>We thank Rabia Malik, Tamta Gelashvili and participants at research seminars at Gothenburg University, Kings College London and the annual meeting of the European Political Science Association 2023 for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

<sup>†</sup>Both authors contributed equally to this work.

<sup>‡</sup>PhD candidate, Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo. [anna.helgoy@stv.uio.no](mailto:anna.helgoy@stv.uio.no)

<sup>§</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of Politics, Languages & International Studies at the University of Bath. [a.c.weeks@bath.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.weeks@bath.ac.uk).

# Introduction

The gender revolution is stalled. In both politics and the labor market, substantial gender gaps in participation and leadership stubbornly persist. These gender gaps in public life are driven in no small part by persistent gender differences in unpaid work in the household. Women, and especially mothers, still take on the vast majority of care and household work across democracies worldwide (Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard 2010; Aassve, Fuochi & Mencarini 2014; Bianchi et al. 2000) – and studies are likely to be underestimating the true gender gap in unpaid work. Thus far, measures of unpaid work mostly account for time spent in physical household labor. Yet, this is only part of the work involved in managing a household and caring for others. The cognitive dimension of household labor - the “mental load” involved in anticipating, fulfilling, and monitoring household needs - remains largely invisible and understudied. Could gender differences in the mental load provide new insights about why the gender revolution remains persistently out of reach?

Unlike physical household labor, the mental load is boundaryless and disjointed, often going on in the back of one’s mind throughout the day. It includes remembering schedules and deadlines, arranging goods and services to support the household, reminding others of what needs to be done, financial management, home maintenance, and juggling priorities and time conflicts. Initial studies suggest it is mostly done by women, especially the routine, non-discretionary tasks such as mental work related to cleaning, child care, scheduling, and anticipating needs (Daminger 2019; Helgøy 2023; Robertson et al. 2019; Weeks 2023). Yet, no major social surveys include questions that measure the mental load, and thus we know little about its consequences for public life. As a first step in furthering our knowledge in this area, we use a survey experiment to investigate how the mental load influences men’s and women’s attitudes about participating in public life.

Our main argument is that increasing mental load salience will reduce intentions to

participate in public life, both in terms of political engagement and workplace advancement. We theorize that due to a crowding-out mechanism and induced stress, people primed to think about their own mental loads will be more reluctant to express interest in political participation or taking on more responsibility at work. In addition, we offer two competing hypotheses about the role that respondent gender plays. First, we theorize that this often invisible form of unpaid labor is frequently on women’s, but not men’s, minds. Because of this, priming the mental load could have weaker effects on women compared to men. For women, the treatment could simply reflect a constant reality they already account for when making decisions about participating in public life. Alternatively, because women often have more intimate knowledge on the nature of cognitive labor and its consequences on capacity, the treatment could have greater effects on women compared to men, who do not link such to-do lists with crowding out other activities.

To investigate these hypotheses, we offer a direct test of the causal impact of priming individual mental load on intentions to participate in politics and pursue advancement at work. By manipulating the salience of respondents’ mental load, we can learn about cognitive labor’s effect on these intentions in a way that is grounded in respondents’ real life experience. Our study targets employed parents, one subgroup likely to face large mental loads. Previous research establishes a clear “motherhood penalty” in pay and promotion on the birth of a child (Correll, Benard & Paik 2007; Gangl & Ziefle 2009; Kleven et al. 2019), in addition to widening gender gaps in political engagement (Naurin, Stolle & Markstedt 2022; Voorpostel & Coffe 2012), making this a crucial site for understanding how dynamics in household labor operate. In line with expectations, we find a sizable impact of mental load priming on political interest, likelihood of political participation, and interest in opportunities to advance at work. While mental load priming tends to impact all respondents in a negative direction, our results for politics tend to be stronger among mothers, while we observe the opposite for work (stronger priming effects among fathers). Interestingly, in response to the

mental load prime fathers but not mothers prefer reduced working hours for their partner.

Our findings about the effect of mental load priming on intentions to participate in public life are important for several reasons. First, it suggests that the literature on gendered dynamics in politics and the labor market may underestimate the effect of household inequality by relying on too rigid conceptualizations of household labor. Our descriptive evidence provides further confirmation from a new case (the UK) that suggests gender gaps in the mental load are large, and associated with stress and negative emotions for mothers but not fathers. Second, more specific knowledge about what household inequality looks like, and which aspects of public life it affects, offers an opportunity to account for this in future policymaking. In the UK, where only two weeks of low-paid paternity leave are offered by the state and the country ranks among the highest in the OECD for child care costs (Chzhen et al. 2019), there is much room for innovating policy configurations that actively incentivize fathers' participation at home.

## **Gender, the Mental Load, and Public Life**

Women's disproportional household work burden has been argued to affect their capacity to participate in the public sphere in various ways, both in terms of politics and work (Coltrane 2000; Teele, Kalla & Rosenbluth 2018; Htun 2005). Existing research tends to examine these consequences by focusing on some select types of either labor market or political participation. We, however, study these outcomes collectively, as two of the most important public arenas in which economic resources, status, and power are negotiated and distributed. Additionally, as the following literature review shows, outcomes related to work and politics are affected by similar dynamics in the division of household labor.

Links between household work and public sphere participation are well-theorized and often assumed in policy development. Household bargaining models suggest that the

capacity for household labor and paid labor exist in a zero-sum game, and women may end up doing more of the former due to comparative advantages (not necessarily biological, but due to existing discrimination in the labor market) (Becker 1991), relatively less resources compared to a male partner (Aassve, Fuochi & Mencarini 2014), more time availability for instance due to a more flexible job (Artis & Pavalko 2003; Hochschild & Machung 2003; Wiesmann et al. 2008), or having a conservative gender ideology (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard 2010). Similarly, carrying a disproportional burden of household work may leave less time and imply fewer opportunities to engage in political activities. For example, having more leisure time is associated with greater political participation for men (Burns, Schlozman & Verba 1997, 2002).

Empirical studies testing these theories find that household inequalities do indeed matter. On the political side, research has shown that family intensive life phases such as pregnancy and early parenthood have a stronger negative impact on women's political interest than men's (Naurin, Stolle & Markstedt 2022; Quaranta & Dotti Sani 2018). Political interest is an important resource that contributes to political participation (Verba, Burns & Schlozman 1997; Burns 2007), making gender gaps in this early form of engagement democratically problematic. Political participation is in itself gendered, though in different ways for different types of participation. Research shows that women are more likely to vote compared to men, and engage in "private" forms of political participation, while men are more likely to partake in "public" political participation such as protests and active engagement in political parties (Coffé & Bolzendahl 2010). Changes in family structures can affect these tendencies in a gendered way, for instance in voting patterns, where men's, but not women's, participation increases after having a child (Voorpostel & Coffe 2012). Moreover, the literature on gendered dynamics in running for political office finds that men are more likely to consider running for office than women (Fox & Lawless 2014). Explanations for this political ambition gap often rely on push- and pull factors. For example, one study

proposes a time availability mechanism: a longer commuting time makes women less likely to run for office, as their time is already pressed with household responsibilities (Silbermann 2015). This is further strengthened by findings that the gender gap in running for office is the smallest at the local level of politics (Devroe et al. 2023).

On the paid work side, gender gaps exist in working time, promotions, and pay, which partly overlap with each other. Part-time work is highly gendered, even in the most gender-equal countries (OECD 2022; Mósesdóttir & Ellingsæter 2017; Emmenegger 2009). Working less hours becomes more common for women when they have children (Weeden, Cha & Bucca 2016), and there is a negative correlation between number of children and transitions from part-time to full-time work (Kitterød, Rønsen & Seierstad 2013). This corresponds to household work becoming even more unequal between female and male partners in the small-children phase (Dominguez-Folgueras, Jurado-Guerrero & Botía-Morillas 2018). Working fewer hours is generally perceived by employers to signal lower work dedication, and part-time workers receive fewer promotions and development opportunities at work (Epstein et al. 1999; Abrahamsen & Fekjær 2017; Mandel & Semyonov 2006). Additionally, part-time positions yield lower salaries not only because of fewer hours worked, but also due to an average lower wage base.

Moreover, and similar to explanations for the gender gap in political ambition, studies suggest a gender ambition gap in the realm of work formed at least partly by gendered family structures. For instance, anticipation of family responsibilities influence women’s choices of more family-friendly career paths (Savela & O’Brien 2016). In one field experiment, single women MBA students avoid expressing professional ambition in front of (especially single) male peers. The authors attribute this finding to marriage market signaling in a society where norms dictate that these skills would not be valued in a wife (Bursztyn, Fujiwara & Pallais 2017). For those who do express intentions to pursue leadership positions

at the start of their careers, research has shown that women’s leadership ambition is more prone to dwindling in their first few years of labor market participation compared to male counterparts, many citing that taking on leadership roles would come at the cost of family time (Beaupre 2022). For wage negotiations, several institutionalized processes contributing to the gender pay gap have been identified in research (Elomäki, Kantola & Koskinen Sandberg 2022). Within these gendered structures, a different behavioral pattern between men and women is also observed. For instance, research shows that women are less likely to negotiate their salaries rigorously, and when they do, they tend to ask for considerably less than male counterparts (Babcock & Laschever 2009; Mazei et al. 2015; Säve-Söderbergh 2019). Gendered wage negotiations have been found to be driven by several structural factors in work organization and personality traits such as risk aversion (for an overview, see Hernandez-Arenaz & Iriberri 2019), but the literature generally does not consider the possibility that women are more constrained in the household sphere and therefore, on average, have lower capacity to pursue higher salaries.

There is thus good reason to believe that women’s disproportional household burden is connected to gender disparities in public life. However, in addition to the lack of direct causal evidence, there is also little knowledge about what the full picture of household inequality actually looks like. Traditionally, household work has been assumed to consist of physical tasks relating to the maintenance or running of a household, and care for children or other dependent family members. This is apparent in that household labor is normally measured in time-use surveys, where individuals log which tasks they perform and how much time they spend on them. However, the emerging literature on cognitive and emotional household labor argues that the conceptualization of household work as physical tasks completion is inadequate. In addition, it is meaningful to also examine cognitive labor loads in order to achieve an encompassing and accurate impression of household work (Mederer 1993; Zimmerman et al. 2002).

Cognitive household labor entails the organizational dimension of household work, which is a prerequisite for combining work and family. Empirical research on the mental load is scarce, and especially quantitative findings are lacking. Qualitative literature has outlined important tendencies, namely that cognitive household labor seems to be highly gender unequal, even in otherwise egalitarian couples, and that this inequality tends to be justified by attributing the division to innate personality traits within the couple that they perceive as ungendered (Daminger 2020; Wiesmann et al. 2008; Zimmerman et al. 2002). Initial quantitative studies offer supportive larger-scale evidence to this gender inequality in two quite different gender equality contexts. In one US study, women reported to be doing over 70 percent of the mental load (Weeks 2023), and in a study done in Norway, more than 70 percent of female respondents claimed to be taking on most of the mental load in their households (Helgøy 2023).

Carrying the responsibility for cognitive labor does not necessarily imply performing the corresponding physical tasks. For instance, monitoring grocery needs, making shopping lists, and planning family meals can be separated from actually cooking dinner (Holter, Svare & Egeland 2008). However, the lack of a physical task does not equate to cognitive labor being less straining. Rather, because this kind of household labor is constant and boundaryless, it can continuously be at the back of one’s mind without being constrained by time and space like physical tasks would (Dean, Churchill & Ruppanner 2022). It is here that potential mechanisms for reduction in public life participation lie. Individuals only have limited rational capacity and must be selective in their decisions about what to pay attention or devote energy to (Simon 1956). By taking up significant cognitive space and energy, the mental load may reduce political and work engagement through a crowding-out mechanism (Weeks 2023). This crowding-out could occur through a type of cognitive overload (constraining how much new information individuals can register and use in conscious activities; Miller 1956; Plass, Moreno & Brünken 2010), or it may happen

through experienced stress of carrying the mental load. Indeed, research has found that women not only experience higher levels of work-family spillover in that they spend more time thinking about the family while at work, but the spillover in itself causes more stress in women compared to men (Offer 2014).

In line with this logic, previous research has presented descriptive findings showing that higher cognitive labor loads are connected to lower interest in politics for women in particular (Weeks 2023), and experimental results showing that a high mental load can lead to a preference for lower working hours under certain conditions (Helgøy 2023). Summarizing the discussion so far, our principal hypothesis is that increasing mental load salience will lead to decreased intentions to advance participation in both politics and work (H1). This hypothesis is further supported by studies showing that exposing respondents to higher cognitive loads leads to less risk-taking and strategic behavior (Deck & Jahedi 2015). Our experimental results represent a short-term reaction to experimental stimulus. However, due to the ongoing relevance of this routine, day-to-day dimension of household labor for women in particular, we expect that our experimental findings could well provide one demonstration of a broader, long-term “crowding-out” phenomenon.

Given that cognitive labor is remarkably gendered, we expect the experimental condition to have differing results on women and men. However, the expected directions of these differences are challenging to hypothesize, as the concept is under-researched. Because we conduct one of the first studies on the mental load’s effect on public sphere participation, we test two competing hypotheses which are both plausible according to the literature’s current state of knowledge. First, it is possible that the treatment effect of expressing less interest and intents to advance in politics and work will be stronger for men than for women, as women are *already* accounting for cognitive household work in their decisions-making (H2.a). This hypothesis builds on research where other gendered concepts are primed to

become salient, such as Klar, Madonia and Schneider’s examination into gendered differences in priming the salience of parenthood on policy preferences. Here, they find that the priming effect only significantly alters men’s, and not women’s, policy preferences, and argue that this is likely because women’s identity as mothers is constant whereas men’s identity as fathers is something more flexible (Klar, Madonia & Schneider 2014).

However, it is also plausible that women will react to our experimental treatment more strongly than men, due to women having more intimate knowledge of the nature of cognitive labor and its consequences on capacity. Women face extreme social pressure to be highly involved in managing their household and children. For example, the ‘intensive mothering’ paradigm, popular across Western democracies and especially among the highly educated / upper class, suggests that mothers are the ones primarily responsible for childrearing, whereas fathers are there to provide additional help (Damaske 2013; Hays 1996). For these reasons, we offer an alternative hypothesis (H2.b): the mental load priming effect will be stronger for women versus men.

## **The UK context**

The UK is an example of a family policy regime classified as familialist, that is, its approach to regulating intra-familial dependence results in a reinforcement of traditional gender roles (Leitner 2003; Ciccio & Verloo 2012). This classification is achieved in two ways, one that is implicit and the other explicit. First, the level of public family support is generally low, making it difficult to combine having children with a dual-earner, full-time working household without the ability to pay for full-time private childcare. This fuels the need for one parent – typically the mother – to in one way or another scale back their labor market involvement, demonstrating implicit familialism (Leitner 2003). Second, explicit familialism directly rewards traditional gender roles through welfare transfers. This is visible in the

UK’s parental leave system, in which the mother primarily qualifies for a longer leave after a child is born, and has to actively transfer leave to the father if sharing the leave period is desirable (Banister & Kerrane 2022).

The family policy context of our study is thus one of a liberal welfare state reluctant to regulate the private sphere, with family policies that tend to reinforce the gendered status quo. That makes for a ‘most-likely’ case scenario where the division of labor might be even more gendered than in other European counterparts. The disproportional burden of the mental load may also be relatively heavier to carry for UK women, given the lack of state support in managing work-life balance. When studying an invisible and rather abstract concept like the mental load, such a case is ideal, as we would expect to find a more pronounced effect under such conditions.

## Data & Methods

To test our hypotheses, we rely on original experimental data collected using the survey provider Prolific in May and June of 2023 (N=1,002). Prolific is an online platform, which recruits respondents primarily via social media. Respondents were paid £0.75 per completed survey, which is considered good by Prolific’s ethical rewards standards. Our sample includes employed UK parents of dependent children (aged 18 and under) who are married or in a steady partnership. Table 1 presents summary statistics. The sample is balanced on gender, and the mean age (40.3) is similar to the most recent 2021 Census data from England and Wales (median age of 40). The mean number of children (1.72) is also similar to recent Census data (1.77). However, other characteristics of our sample are not representative of the population of UK parents. In particular, ethnic minority groups are underrepresented

and our sample is more highly educated than the population.<sup>1</sup> Our study was pre-registered and approved by our university’s relevant ethics boards.<sup>2</sup> Balance tests (see Appendix Table A1) show no imbalances in characteristics across treated and control parents in our sample.

Table 1: Summary Statistics, UK Parents (Prolific Sample)

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Woman	997	0.502	0.500	0	1
Higher education	1,002	0.626	0.484	0	1
White	1,002	0.895	0.306	0	1
Age	1,000	40.4	7.559	20	65
Works full-time	1,002	0.759	0.428	0	1
Age of youngest child	980	6.972	4.979	0	18
Number of children living at home	931	1.721	0.725	1	4
Mental load reported share	998	67.535	20.086	4	100

Notes: All survey respondents are confirmed to be employed parents of children ages 0 to 18 living in the UK (eligibility criteria implemented via blocking on pre-survey data by Prolific). Not all respondents answered the question about age of youngest child, and some respondents are parents who do not have children living at home. Note that the response options for number of children living at home range from minimum “0 ”to maximum “4 or more”, which we code as “4”. The study was fielded from May 24, 2023 to June 4, 2023.

The mental load is impossible to observe directly because it goes on inside people’s heads. This makes it a particularly difficult concept to manipulate experimentally – we cannot directly treat it by imposing more cognitive household labor on one group but not another. However, we can manipulate the salience of individual mental load by asking respondents to think carefully about it, and this is our main methodological contribution. In the experiment, we randomly manipulate whether respondents are primed to think about their own cognitive household labor before answering a series of questions about political engagement and advancement at work. In the treatment condition, respondents are asked to think about and write down their cognitive household labor “to do” list, listing up to seven

---

<sup>1</sup>According to the 2021 Census of England and Wales, 81.7% of the population identifies as white, while 33.8% of residents report having the highest level of education qualification, a Level 4 qualification.

<sup>2</sup>The pre-analysis plan is available here: <https://aspredicted.org/B3P7JW>.

items. Specifically, they are prompted:

Running a household and taking care of family involves both physical and mental types of work. In the following set of questions, we want you to think about the **mental work** involved in managing your household and caring for children, not the physical aspect.

People often find that there are many things they need to think about in their day-to-day life related to family and their household, such as keeping track of family schedules, noticing when the house needs to be tidied, meal planning, noticing when items need to be repaired, or making financial decisions, for example.

Being as specific as possible, **please list up to seven mental tasks related to your household and family that are generally your responsibility.**

After the open text response, respondents are asked to estimate their own proportion of cognitive household labor in their household, and rate their satisfaction and fairness perception about the division of this labor. They also answer a series of questions about how their list makes them feel (stressed, happy, empty, or motivated). In the control condition, respondents proceed to questions about political and workforce participation without seeing any information about cognitive household labor until after all of the public life questions.

Our dependent variables related to public life are grouped into two categories: politics and work. In the section about political engagement, respondents are asked about how likely they are to: 1) take an interest in politics (local, national, and international issues); participate in different types of political activities, some of which can be considered more 2) private forms of political participation (signing a petition, boycotting, donating or raising money) and others 3) public forms of political participation (campaigning, participating in a public demonstration, rally, or protest); 4) vote in the next election, and; 5) ever run for office.

We distinguish public versus private forms of participation following research that shows gender gaps in participation tend to be limited to public forms of participation – perhaps because these forms tend to be more time-intensive and expensive (Coffé & Bolzendahl 2010). In the section about work, respondents are asked about: 1) their ideal number of working hours, if they could choose; 2) the ideal number of working hours for their partner, if they could choose, and; 3) a series of questions about how likely they are to pursue advancement opportunities at work related to leadership, training, salary negotiation, and additional responsibilities. We thus examine five main dependent variables related to politics (interest, voting, ambition, public participation, and private participation) and three related to work (personal hours, partner hours, and advancement opportunities). All respondents then go on to answer demographic questions in the final stage of the survey, including gender, age, number of children, age of children, and household income in bands.

## **Describing the Mental Load among UK Parents**

Because studies are only beginning to measure cognitive household labor, before discussing the experimental results we present some descriptive statistics from our data on UK parents. Figure 1 shows the distribution of mental work that respondents estimate is done by them personally to take of their household, as opposed to someone else. The figure shows a large gender gap of approximately 21 percentage points, with mothers reporting that they are responsible for 78% of such labor on average, compared to fathers’ 57%. A t-test confirms that the difference is statistically significant. While responses for men center around the middle of the distribution (the median response for fathers is 51%), for mothers the median response is skewed left at 80%.

Next, Table 2 displays the mean results of all survey questions related to the mental load by gender. The table confirms that not only do mothers say that they do more household

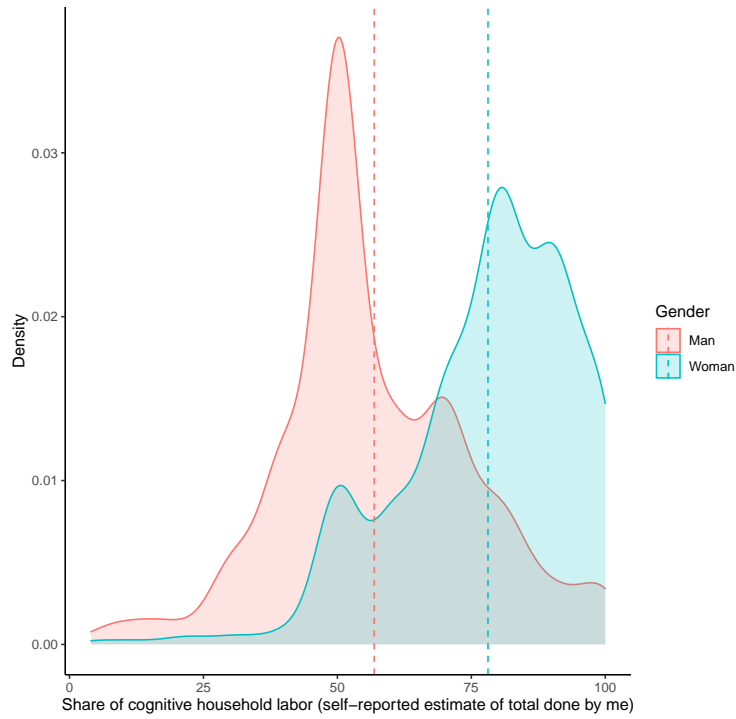


Figure 1: Gender differences in mental household labor among parents in the UK  
The survey question reads, “Considering all the mental work to take care of your household, about how much of this work is done by you, as opposed to someone else?”  
Response ranges from 0 to 100. Data include 997 respondents (500 women, 497 men).

mental work than fathers, but when asked to list up to seven mental tasks related to your household and family that are generally your responsibility, mothers wrote longer responses (average of 182 characters compared to men’s 151). The rest of the table shows that mothers are not happy about this unequal division of labor. Mothers report being significantly less satisfied about the division of mental work in their household compared to fathers (among parents, 35% of women are satisfied compared to 63% of men). Mothers are also less likely to believe that the division of mental work in their household is fair (fathers), and they are more likely to express negative emotions such as stress or unhappiness about it. The negative emotions index we employ is scaled from 0 to 1, incorporating responses about how stressed, happy, empty, or motivated that the individual’s mental load list makes them feel (happy and motivated are reverse coded). All of these gender differences are statistically significant.

Table 2: Mental Load Survey Responses by Gender

	Fathers	Mothers	Difference	P-value
Mental load personal share	56.87	78.11	-21.24	0.00
Number of characters, mental load response	151.47	182.85	-31.38	0.00
Satisfied with mental load	0.63	0.35	0.28	0.00
Fairness perception of mental load	0.61	0.33	0.28	0.00
Negative emotions about mental load	0.42	0.48	-0.06	0.00

Note: Entries for Men and Women are mean values. The Difference column reports the differences in means (Fathers minus mothers) and the final column corresponding p-values according to t-tests.

Finally, we use a structural topic model (STM) to describe the content of the open-ended responses we collected about individuals’ own mental load tasks. On average, respondents wrote 167 characters when asked to list the mental load tasks that are generally their responsibility. This is roughly equivalent to 83 words or 4 to 6 sentences. This suggests that respondents took the prompt seriously and engaged with the exercise in a meaningful way. The STM is an unsupervised machine learning algorithm that finds different ‘topics’ and their corresponding features (words) with the highest conditional probability of occurring in

documents (here, individual responses) (Roberts et al. 2014).

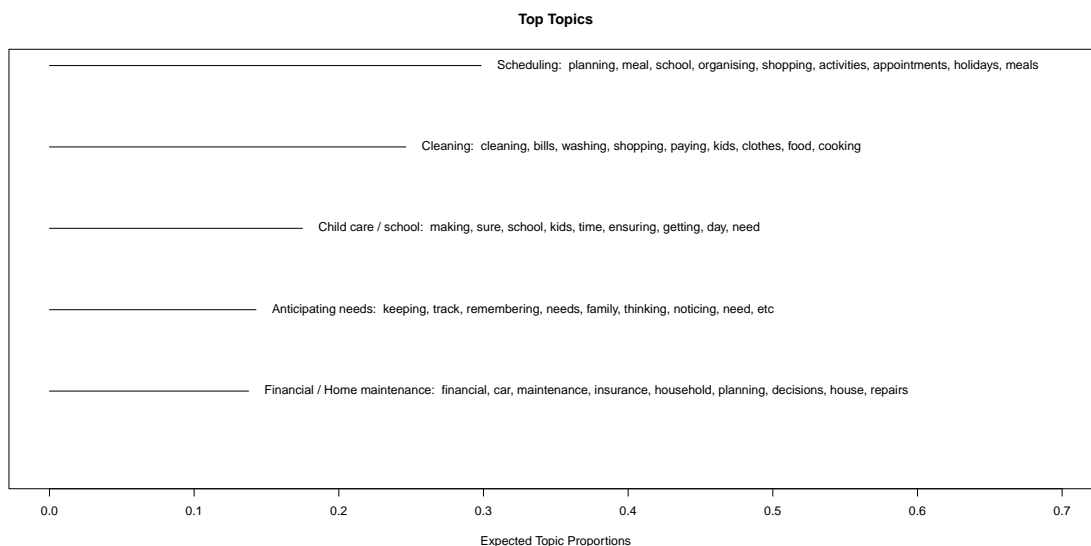


Figure 2: Distribution of Topics Across Open-Ended Responses

Notes: Expected topic proportions are presented with 10 associated words occurring with highest probability in the topic. Topics were named after examining highest probability words, frequency-exclusivity words (FREX), and examples of responses that are highly associated with topics.

Figure 2 displays the top topics from a 5-topic model and the frequency of these topics within our data. Reassuringly, it shows that the topics that emerge from the open-ended responses relate well to qualitative evidence conceptualizing the different domains of cognitive household labor; for example, the most prevalent topic occurring is related to scheduling, followed by mental work related to child care, cleaning, anticipating household needs, and finances and home maintenance (Daminger 2019). We also assess the influence of respondent gender on the topic proportions, and find that mothers are significantly more likely to use words associated with the “Scheduling” topic, while fathers are significantly more likely to use words related to the “Finances / Home maintenance” topic.<sup>3</sup> In summary, the initial descriptive evidence confirms our expectations that gender gaps in the mental

---

<sup>3</sup>We use “estimateEffect” within the stm package in R to estimate the relationship between gender and different topics. No significant gender differences were found for the other topics.

load are large, that mothers and fathers specialize in different types of mental work, and that this has negative psychological implications for mothers in particular.

## Experimental Results

We begin by presenting our main results related to the impact of mental load priming for all respondents, before examining heterogeneous treatment effects by binary gender. For ease of interpretation, we rescale the majority of outcome variables to range between 0 and 1, where higher values refer to greater interest or engagement in different forms of public life. The exception is preferred working hours for oneself and one’s partner, where we retain hours as the unit of analysis. In the analysis below, we present the results of ordinary least squares models with a binary treatment indicator which is coded “1” for those who were asked to think about their own mental load before questions about public life, and “0” otherwise. Recall that our principal hypothesis (H1) is that being asked to think about cognitive household labor will reduce interest and intents to advance in politics and work.

Figure 3 presents the results of our analysis examining whether priming respondents to think about their own cognitive household labor affects attitudes towards political engagement and workplace advancement. Starting with *Political interest* at the top, the figure shows that priming personal mental load significantly reduces reported interest in politics by 0.058 (on a scale of 0 to 1). To put this in context, the mean level of political interest in our data is 0.61, with a standard deviation of 0.23. The effect is thus sizable, equivalent to approximately 25% of a standard deviation.<sup>4</sup> Moving down the figure, we find that our mental load treatment has similar negative impacts on both *Vote intention* (likelihood of

---

<sup>4</sup>This measure of political interest incorporates reported interest in local, national, and international issues. Looking at these as separate outcomes, we find similar negative treatment effects for all three, but the size of effects ranges from a reduction in interest by 0.07 units for both local and national political issues ( $p < 0.01$ ) to a 0.03 unit reduction in interest in international politics ( $p < 0.10$ ).

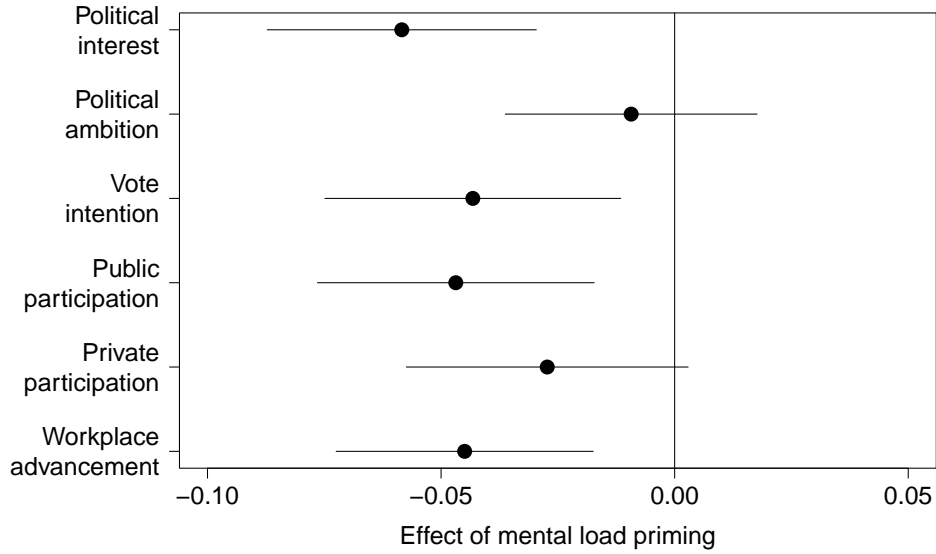


Figure 3: Effect of Mental Load Priming on Engagement in Politics and Work  
Notes: Plot depicts point estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (mental load priming) on the outcome variables measuring intentions to engage in politics and workplace advancement (described on the y-axis). Full results can be found in Table A2 of the Appendix. Data include 998 respondents.

voting in the next UK election; effect size =  $-0.043$ ) and *Public participation* (including likelihood of campaigning for a political cause, candidate, or policy, attending a political meeting or rally, or taking part in a demonstration; effect size =  $-0.047$ ).

However, we do not find evidence that priming the mental load impacts *Political ambition* (measured as a scale indicating likelihood of ever running for office), nor do we find that it significantly impacts *Private participation* (such as participating in boycotts, signing petitions, or donating money / raising funds). Political ambition is rare; only six percent of respondents reported that they were likely to ever think about running for office one day. We are thus not surprised that priming the mental load has little impact on one’s decision of whether or not to pursue political office (although of course, over the long term personal and family circumstance may impact this decision a great deal; e.g., Crowder-Meyer 2020). Considering the participation results, here our findings correspond well with existing studies

suggesting that gender gaps are limited to more formal, *public* forms of participation, which tend to be more resource-dependent and less easily incorporated into daily life (Coffé & Bolzendahl 2010). If the mental load crowds out space or energy for political activities, it is logical for this to occur especially for these more costly forms of participation.

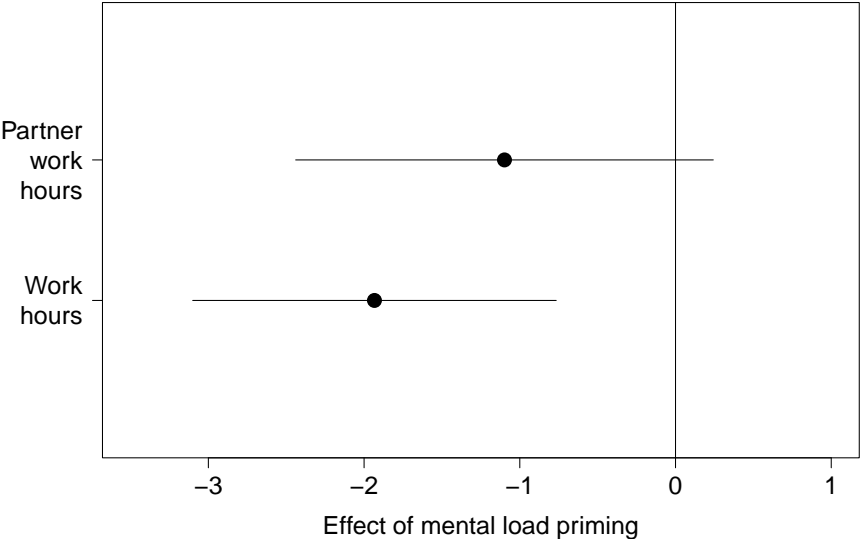


Figure 4: Effect of Mental Load Priming on Preferred Working Hours for Self and Partner

Notes: Plot depicts point estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (mental load priming) on the outcome variables measuring hours per week respondents would choose to work (described on the y-axis). Full results can be found in Table A2 of the Appendix. Data include 998 respondents.

Turning to our outcome variables related to workplace advancement, we report similar, negative results to those observed for political engagement. Priming personal mental load significantly reduces reported intentions to engage in workplace activities related to advancement (including pursuing a leadership role, further training, and new responsibilities at work, and negotiating for a higher salary). Substantively, the effect size of -0.045 is equivalent to approximately 20% of a standard deviation in our workplace advancement scale (mean = 0.68, SD = 0.22). Additionally, in Figure 4 we present the results of our analysis of the effects of mental load priming on preferred work hours. This question asks

respondents how many hours a week they would choose to work if they could choose, keeping in mind that earnings would go up or down according to how many hours you work, and we also ask respondents a similar question about their preferred working hours for their partner. Figure 4 shows that priming the mental load causes a reduction in preferred working time by nearly 2 hours per week. While the treatment is similarly linked to a reduction in preferred working hours for one’s partner, this effect is not significant at conventional levels in our overall sample.

### **Subgroup heterogeneity: fathers versus mothers**

Next, we investigate heterogeneous effects by respondent gender. We expect that priming the mental load might impact fathers and mothers in different ways, and thus offer two alternative hypotheses summarizing potential gendered impacts. First, effects might be stronger for fathers than for mothers, if women tend to already accounting for cognitive household work in their decision-making (H2.a). Conversely, if women have more intimate knowledge on the nature of cognitive labor and its consequences on capacity, effects might be stronger for mothers than fathers (H2.b). Figures 5 and 6 present the results of the analysis split by gender.

Figure 5 reveals some similarities between men and women – for both fathers and mothers, the impact of mental load priming tends to be negative, as expected – but also some interesting differences. In line with the expectations of Hypothesis H2.b, we find that treatment effects tend to be larger in size and significant at lower levels for mothers versus fathers (although as the overlapping confidence intervals indicate, gender differences are not statistically significant). This is true for the outcomes of political interest, where the effect size for mothers is approximately double the effect size observed for fathers (effect size = -0.076 for mothers vs -0.037 for fathers) and for public forms of participation (effect size

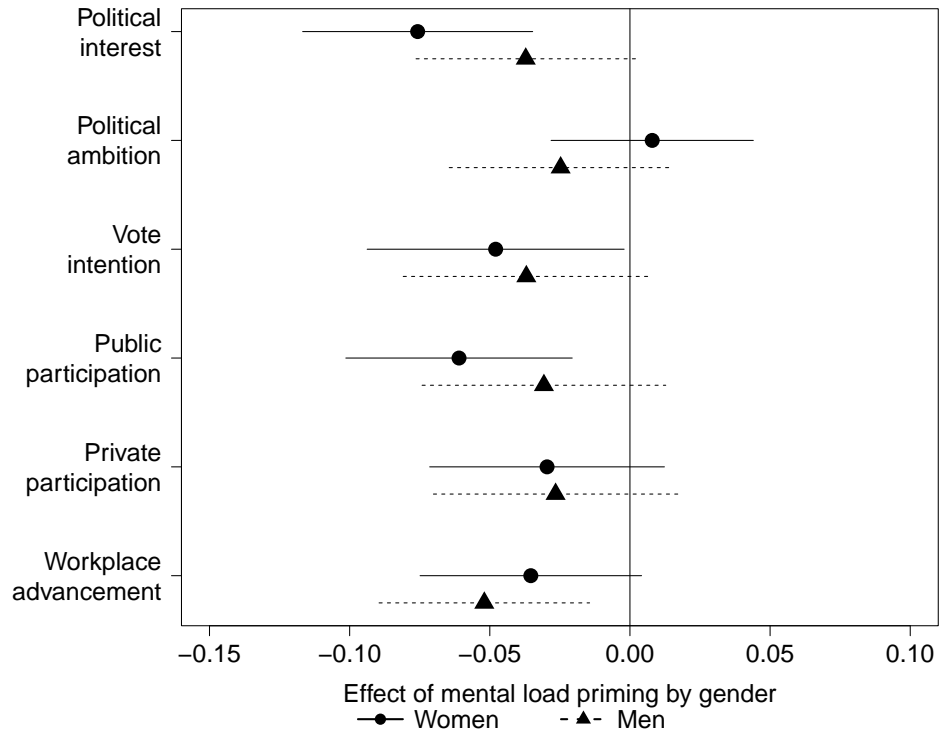


Figure 5: Effect of Mental Load Priming on Engagement in Politics and Work, for Mothers and Fathers

Notes: Plot depicts point estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (mental load priming) on the outcome variables measuring intentions to engage in politics and workplace advancement (described on the y-axis). Full results can be found in Tables A3 and A4 of the Appendix. Data include 997 respondents (500 women, 497 men).

= -0.061 for women vs -0.031 for men), and to a lesser extent vote intention (effect size = -0.048 for mothers vs -0.037 for fathers). However, we find the opposite – a larger treatment effect for fathers (support for H2.a)– for the outcome of workplace advancement. After being primed to think about own cognitive household labor, fathers report being less interested in pursuing opportunities to advance at work compared to mothers (effect size = -0.052 for men vs -0.037 for women).

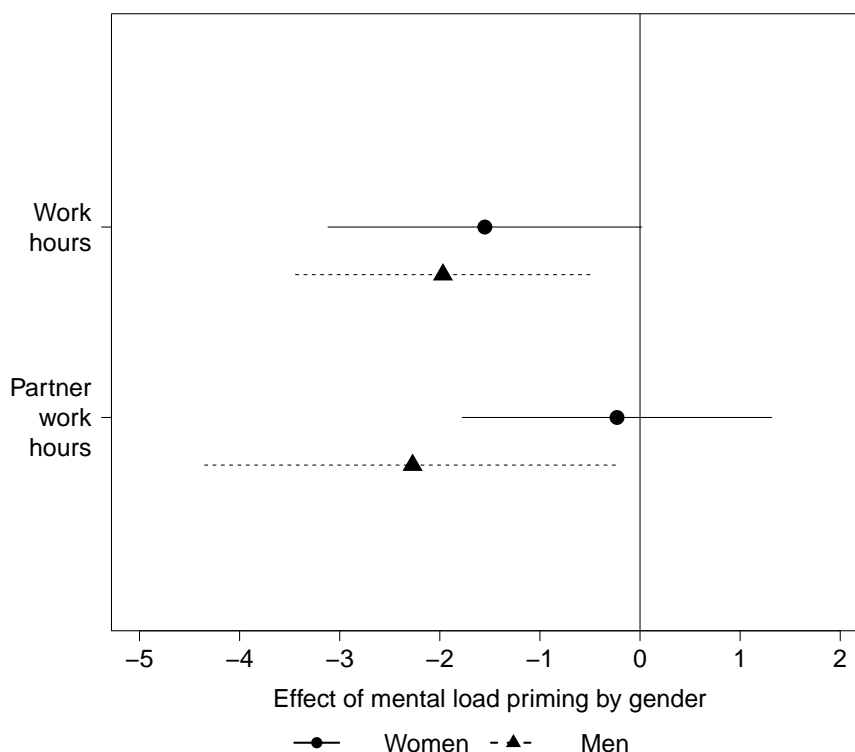


Figure 6: Effect of Mental Load Priming on Preferred Working Hours for Self and Partner, for Mothers and Fathers

Notes: Plot depicts point estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (mental load priming) on the outcome variables measuring hours per week respondents would choose to work (described on the y-axis). Full results can be found in Tables A3 and A4 of the Appendix. Data include 997 respondents (500 mothers, 497 fathers).

Similarly, in Figure 6 we report mental load priming treatment effects for preferred working hours by gender, and we find stronger results for fathers here too. After being

primed to think about own mental load, fathers say that they prefer to work approximately 2 hours less per week (compared to control), whereas the treatment effect for mothers is a 1.55 hours reduction. What might explain the stronger treatment effects for mothers in the context of politics, and fathers in the context of work? First, we note that differences between mothers and fathers are not statistically significant, as evidenced by the overlapping 95% confidence interval bars shown in Figures 5 and 6. This could be due in part to the loss of valuable statistical power in our subgroup analysis. However, we caution that the heterogeneous effects presented here ideally should be replicated among larger samples of parents.

One interpretation of the greater responsiveness of fathers versus mothers to work-related activities might be related to their greater commitment to working time compared to mothers. In our sample, 95% of fathers are working full-time, compared to 58% of mothers. Perhaps greater levels of investment in work mean that fathers believe that they can realistically scale back in response to cognitive overload from the household. Because working 2 hours less per week for fathers is equivalent to a smaller reduction in the percentage of working time compared to the same reduction from mothers (who work fewer hours), this can still be consistent with maintaining male-breadwinner and ideal worker norms.

At the same time, our findings also suggest that fathers seek to offload some of this cognitive burden at the expense of their partner’s working time. In our subgroup analysis we find a treatment effect for the preferred hours that partners would work if the respondent could choose, but only among fathers. After being primed to think about own mental load, fathers say that they prefer their partners to work 2.3 hours less per week (compared to control), whereas we find no similar treatment effect among mothers (coefficient = -0.23, not significant). Strikingly, this treatment effect of mental load priming on preferred working hours for one’s partner is larger than the reduction men express for their own working hours.

It is also larger than the working time reduction mothers themselves express on treatment. Not only do mothers report greater shares of mental load responsibility in their own households compared to fathers, but when parents are primed to think about it our evidence suggests that fathers (but not mothers) consider compensating for this at the expense of their spouse’s working time. This may be connected to the prominent father identity as the breadwinner of the family, which, although increasingly challenged by changing ways of defining status in modern fatherhood, is strongly persisting (Reid 2018; Williams, Blair-Loy & Berdahl 2013). The finding could also be linked to economic self-interest logic. Considering that men on average earn more than women, it could be seen as a rational solution to a time or resource squeeze problem that the person with the lowest salary cuts their working hours, in line with the theory of relative resources (Aassve, Fuochi & Mencarini 2014). However, experimental findings have shown that there is something beyond economic self-interest ongoing in these dynamics, too – men, but not women, wish to increase their working hours when their partner earns a relatively low salary (Helgøy 2023).

Finally, the treatment effects reported here are short-term; we argue, however, that the experimental results represent more than a temporary reaction to experimental stimulus. Decisions about how to participate in public life likely result from longer-term considerations, during which reminders of the mental load are manifold and norms tend to find gender inequality in its division more justifiable than in physical household labor (Zimmerman et al. 2002; Wiesmann et al. 2008). Our survey also offers some descriptive evidence of these dynamics. At the very end of the survey, we gave respondents the option to tell us what they think about the relationship between the mental load and public life participation. This optional question read, “In this study we are interested in learning about whether the mental work people do to manage their household and care for their families impacts their decisions about whether and how to participate in politics and pursue advancement at work. If you have any comments about how such mental work relates to your

decisions about work and politics, please write them here.” Over 200 respondents responded (21% of our sample, with no significant gender difference). We read through all responses and created a binary indicator for whether the respondent believed that the mental load impacted public life (“1”) or not (“0”).<sup>5</sup> We found that of those that clearly answered this question directly (a subset of 132 respondents), the majority (71%) believe that the mental load does impact on their own decisions. Women are especially likely to take this view; while 81% of women responded that they think it matters in their own lives, only 58% of men did.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the open-ended text responses reveal exactly the kind of crowding-out mechanism we expect at work in parents’ own day-to-day lives. For example, one mother writes, “I find it difficult to imagine having space left in my head to take on more work. I wish for a clone to be a wife for me.” Another mother responds, “I put more of my mental energy into my home life now we have two children under three. I have much less energy left over for thinking about politics and do less hours so think less about work so that I can help with more childcare at home. My priorities have definitely shifted.” Men, too, write about the same kinds of bandwidth pressures. For example, one father says, “Basically political activity is on back seat till kids have flown the coop,” and another comments, “I currently have a lot to think about in terms of home life and this means I can’t think about taking on active political engagement - my mind is too full of other tasks at this stage in life.” Of course, not all respondents agree that the mental load matters in this way, and men were more likely to respond that it does not. For example, one father writes, “The mental work is not exactly a burden. It’s one thing to notice the dishes need washed. It’s much more onerous to actually spend the time washing them.” In sum, however, the open-ended responses were generally in line with first, that there is indeed a connection between the

---

<sup>5</sup>Both authors reviewed each response and agreed the coding.

<sup>6</sup>A t-test confirms that the difference is statistically significant.

mental load and public sphere participation, and second, that this often happens through a crowding-out mechanism.

## Conclusion

How does priming individual ‘mental load’ impact men’s and women’s intentions to participate in public life? We offer a novel way of studying the mental load experimentally by priming individuals to think carefully about their own cognitive household tasks and associated feelings. Our study of UK parents reveals strong negative effects of mental load priming on political interest, vote intention, public forms of participation, interest in workplace advancement, and preferred working hours. For fathers (but not mothers), we also find that priming individual mental load causes a reduction in the preferred working hours for their partner. Moreover, our descriptive results reveal that cognitive labor tasks (including mental work related to scheduling, cleaning, child care, anticipating needs, and financial and home maintenance) are widespread among parents and highly gendered. Women, like the UK mothers in our sample, tend to the majority of this work. We find that mothers report primary responsibility for 78% of their household’s cognitive labor, compared to fathers’ 57%. In addition, our experimental results suggesting negative impacts on intentions to participate in public life are matched by observational data from parents in the United States, where a study finds that high levels of the mental load are linked to lower political engagement for mothers in particular (Weeks 2023). A natural follow-on study would also explore how high levels of the mental load relate to paid labor force participation and working time for women and men.

As expected, we find gender differences within the experimental effect. Due to the novelty of research on the mental load and a subsequent lack of knowledge on its effect, we presented competing hypotheses to this end. On one hand, the experimental treatment may

have a stronger effect among women due to their more intimate knowledge on cognitive labor and its effect on capacity. On the other hand, the effect may be stronger among men, because women already account for the mental load in their decision-making and priming its salience will thus not make a substantial difference. We find evidence that support both competing hypotheses, but for different realms of public life. For outcomes related to politics, effects are generally stronger among women, and for those related to work, effects are stronger among men.

The differences between mothers and fathers which emerge in our sub-group analysis are not statistically significant, and should be replicated on larger samples. However, one plausible interpretation of the different patterns we report relates to our hypotheses about whether women are already accounting for the mental load in their public life decision making. Participation in politics is a crucial and integrated part of public life, however, it is typically not a daily activity of obligatory nature. Work, however, is a constant and necessary engagement on a daily basis for most people and thus involves a continuous work-life balancing act, especially for women. Therefore, it seems reasonable that in the realm of work, the mental load is "already accounted for" by mothers to a larger extent than in politics, which to a higher degree is of a more voluntary nature. Fathers' opposing pattern of having stronger results in the work realm is also intriguing, and requires a separate explanation as it is not plausible that they are already accounting for the mental load in either politics or work. The findings could be related to men's labor market participation already being high, making the work realm the space where they can reasonably downscale their commitment when faced with stress.

The implications of our study are sobering. We provide novel evidence suggesting that the mental load can crowd out space for taking an interest in other types of activities, including politics and workplace advancement. Even though the experimental results are

observed for both men and women, the mental load itself is in reality highly gendered. So long as women continue to be mostly responsible for this often invisible form of household labor, it follows that they are likely to remain in the background of public life. Thus, the mental load may indeed be a contributor to the stalled gender revolution. Beyond these meaningful implications in terms of gender equality, our results highlight a growing need to move beyond time-based measures of unpaid labor. This implies conceptualizing and testing measures of not only cognitive labor but also emotional labor, which we do not focus on here (but see Dean, Churchill & Ruppanner 2022). By calling attention to these significant gender gaps and their implications, we can expose and raise awareness of hidden inequalities, which is perhaps the first step to inform future policymaking.

We see at least two logical next steps for advancing the study of the mental load in political science. First, further research is needed to unpack the specific mechanisms through which the mental load impacts decision-making. Our experiment primes individual mental load as well as associated feelings and emotions about it, making it hard to parse whether the extent of mental load or feelings about it drive the negative effects observed. 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 in the workforce and political community. Second, the external validity of our findings should be tested across different samples and different countries. For example, does the effect of mental load priming extend to non-parents? Given that the UK can be classified as a most-likely case for this study due to its familialist approach to family policy, would our findings hold in a more gender-egalitarian social policy context? Comparative data will be imperative in order to identify policy tools that promote a more equal mental load. A productive line of research for future studies is thus to pinpoint the micro- and macro-level (social policy) determinants of taking on the mental load for women and men. Under what

conditions do men take on more of load? Does de-familialist family policy, seen for instance in the Nordic countries, contribute to equalizing the mental load between genders? With this information, policymakers will be well-placed to target new policies and interventions to close gender gaps in private and public life.

## References

- Aassve, Arnstein, Giulia Fuochi & Letizia Mencarini. 2014. “Desperate Housework: Relative Resources, Time Availability, Economic Dependency, and Gender Ideology Across Europe.” *Journal of Family Issues* 35(8):1000–1022.  
**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0192513X14522248>
- Abrahamsen, Bente & Silje Bringsrud Fekjær. 2017. “Dedikasjon og deltidsønsker blant politi og sykepleierstudenter.” *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* 58(04):389–408.  
**URL:** [https://www.idunn.no/tfs/2017/04/dedikasjon\\_og\\_deltidssoensker\\_blant\\_politi\\_og\\_sykepleierstude](https://www.idunn.no/tfs/2017/04/dedikasjon_og_deltidssoensker_blant_politi_og_sykepleierstude)
- Artis, Julie E. & Eliza K. Pavalko. 2003. “Explaining the Decline in Women’s Household Labor: Individual Change and Cohort Differences.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65(3):746–761.  
**URL:** <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2003.00746.x>
- Babcock, Linda & Sara Laschever. 2009. *Women Don’t Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. OCLC: 994605943.
- Banister, Emma & Ben Kerrane. 2022. “Glimpses of change? UK fathers navigating work and care within the context of Shared Parental Leave.” *Gender, Work & Organization* p. gwao.12813.  
**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12813>
- Beaupre, Jean G. 2022. “To lead or not to lead: exploring how young women’s early career experiences impact their leadership ambition.” *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 37(8):1064–1079.  
**URL:** <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/GM-11-2021-0344/full/html>
- Becker, Gary S. 1991. *A treatise on the family: Enlarged edition*. Harvard university press.

- Bianchi, Suzanne M., Melissa A. Milkie, Liana C. Sayer & John P. Robinson. 2000. "Is Anyone Doing the Housework? Trends in the Gender Division of Household Labor." *Social Forces* 79(1):191.  
**URL:** <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2675569?origin=crossref>
- Burns, Nancy. 2007. "Gender in the Aggregate, Gender in the Individual, Gender and Political Action." *Politics & Gender* 3(01).  
**URL:** <http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstracts1743923X07221014>
- Burns, Nancy, Kay Lehman Schlozman & Sidney Verba. 1997. "The public consequences of private inequality: Family life and citizen participation." *American political science review* 91(2):373–389.
- Burns, Nancy, Kay Lehman Schlozman & Sidney Verba. 2002. The private roots of public action. In *The Private Roots of Public Action*. Harvard University Press.
- Bursztyn, Leonardo, Thomas Fujiwara & Amanda Pallais. 2017. "'Acting wife': Marriage market incentives and labor market investments." *American Economic Review* 107(11):3288–3319.
- Chzhen, Yekaterina, Gwyther Rees, Anna Gromada et al. 2019. Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU. Technical report.
- Ciccia, Rossella & Mieke Verloo. 2012. "Parental leave regulations and the persistence of the male breadwinner model: Using fuzzy-set ideal type analysis to assess gender equality in an enlarged Europe." *Journal of European Social Policy* 22(5):507–528.  
**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0958928712456576>
- Coffé, Hilde & Catherine Bolzendahl. 2010. "Same game, different rules? Gender differences in political participation." *Sex roles* 62:318–333.

- Coltrane, Scott. 2000. "Research on Household Labor: Modeling and Measuring the Social Embeddedness of Routine Family Work." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62(4):1208–1233.  
**URL:** <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01208.x>
- Correll, Shelley J., Stephen Benard & In Paik. 2007. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology* 112(5):1297–1339.  
**URL:** <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/511799>
- Crowder-Meyer, Melody. 2020. "Baker, bus driver, babysitter, candidate? Revealing the gendered development of political ambition among ordinary Americans." *Political Behavior* 42(2):359–384.
- Damaske, Sarah. 2013. "Work, family, and accounts of mothers' lives using discourse to navigate intensive mothering ideals." *Sociology Compass* 7(6):436–444.
- Daminger, Allison. 2019. "The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor." *American Sociological Review* 84(4):609–633.  
**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122419859007>
- Daminger, Allison. 2020. "De-gendered Processes, Gendered Outcomes: How Egalitarian Couples Make Sense of Non-egalitarian Household Practices." *American Sociological Review* 85(5):806–829.  
**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122420950208>
- Dean, Liz, Brendan Churchill & Leah Ruppanner. 2022. "The mental load: building a deeper theoretical understanding of how cognitive and emotional labor over *load* women and mothers." *Community, Work & Family* 25(1):13–29.  
**URL:** <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13668803.2021.2002813>
- Deck, Cary & Salar Jahedi. 2015. "The effect of cognitive load on economic decision making:

A survey and new experiments.” *European Economic Review* 78:97–119.

**URL:** <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0014292115000690>

Devroe, Robin, Hilde Coffé, Audrey Vandeleene & Bram Wauters. 2023. “Gender Gaps in Political Ambition on Different Levels of Policy-Making.” *Parliamentary Affairs* p. gsad019.

**URL:** <https://academic.oup.com/pa/advance-article/doi/10.1093/pa/gsad019/7275673>

Dominguez-Folgueras, Marta, Teresa Jurado-Guerrero & Carmen Botía-Morillas. 2018.

“Against the Odds? Keeping a Nontraditional Division of Domestic Work After First Parenthood in Spain.” *Journal of Family Issues* 39(7):1855–1879.

**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0192513X17729399>

Elomäki, Anna, Johanna Kantola & Paula Koskinen Sandberg, eds. 2022. *Social Partners and Gender Equality: Change and Continuity in Gendered Corporatism in Europe*. Gender and Politics Cham: Springer International Publishing.

**URL:** <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-81178-5>

Emmenegger, Patrick. 2009. “Barriers to entry: insider/outsider politics and the political determinants of job security regulations.” *Journal of European Social Policy* 19(2):131–146.

**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0958928708101866>

Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs, Carroll Seron, Bonnie Oglensky & Robert Sauté. 1999. *The part-time paradox: time norms, professional lives, family, and gender*. New York: Routledge.

Fox, Richard L. & Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014. “Uncovering the Origins of the Gender Gap in Political Ambition.” *American Political Science Review* 108(3):499–519.

**URL:** [https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003055414000227/type/journal\\_article](https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003055414000227/type/journal_article)

Gangl, Markus & Andrea Ziefle. 2009. “Motherhood, labor force behavior, and women’s careers: An empirical assessment of the wage penalty for motherhood in Britain, Germany,

- and the united states.” *Demography* 46(2):341–369.
- URL:** <https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/46/2/341/169943/Motherhood-labor-force-behavior-and-women-s>
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.
- Helgøy, Anna. 2023. “What sustains feminized part-time work at the gender equality frontier? Evidence from a factorial survey experiment.”.
- Hernandez-Arenaz, Iñigo & Nagore Iriberrí. 2019. A Review of Gender Differences in Negotiation. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Economics and Finance*. Oxford University Press.
- URL:** <https://oxfordre.com/economics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190625979.001.0001/acrefore-9780190625979-e-464>
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell & Anne Machung. 2003. *The second shift*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Holter, Øystein, Helge Svare & Cathrine Egeland. 2008. Likestilling og livskvalitet 2007. AFI-rapport 1 Arbeidsforskningsinstituttet.
- Htun, Mala. 2005. “What It Means to Study Gender and the State.” *Politics & Gender* 1(01).
- URL:** <http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstracts1743923X05241016>
- Kitterød, Ragni Hege, Marit Rønsen & Ane Seierstad. 2013. “Mobilizing female labour market reserves: What promotes women’s transitions between part-time and full-time work?” *Acta Sociologica* 56(2):155–171.
- URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0001699313479954>
- Klar, Samara, Heather Madonia & Monica C. Schneider. 2014. “The influence of threatening

parental primes on mothers' versus fathers' policy preferences." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2(4):607–623.

**URL:** <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21565503.2014.969744>

Kleven, Henrik, Camille Landais, Johanna Posch, Andreas Steinhauer & Josef Zweimüller. 2019. Child penalties across countries: Evidence and explanations. In *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. Vol. 109 American Economic Association 2014 Broadway, Suite 305, Nashville, TN 37203 pp. 122–126.

Lachance-Grzela, Mylène & Geneviève Bouchard. 2010. "Why Do Women Do the Lion's Share of Housework? A Decade of Research." *Sex Roles* 63(11-12):767–780.

**URL:** <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11199-010-9797-z>

Leitner, Sigrid. 2003. "Varieties of familialism: The caring function of the family in comparative perspective." *European Societies* 5(4):353–375.

**URL:** <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1461669032000127642>

Mandel, Hadas & Moshe Semyonov. 2006. "A Welfare State Paradox: State Interventions and Women's Employment Opportunities in 22 Countries." *American Journal of Sociology* 111(6):1910–1949.

**URL:** <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/499912>

Mazei, Jens, Joachim Hüffmeier, Philipp Alexander Freund, Alice F. Stuhlmacher, Lena Bilke & Guido Hertel. 2015. "A meta-analysis on gender differences in negotiation outcomes and their moderators." *Psychological Bulletin* 141(1):85–104.

**URL:** <http://doi.apa.org/getdoi.cfm?doi=10.1037/a0038184>

Mederer, Helen J. 1993. "Division of Labor in Two-Earner Homes: Task Accomplishment versus Household Management as Critical Variables in Perceptions about Family Work."

*Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55(1):133.

**URL:** <https://www.jstor.org/stable/352964?origin=crossref>

Miller, George A. 1956. "The magical number seven, plus or minus two: Some limits on our capacity for processing information." *Psychological review* 63(2):81.

Mósesdóttir, Lilja & Anne Lise Ellingsæter. 2017. "Ideational struggles over women's part-time work in Norway: Destabilizing the gender contract." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 40(4):1018–1038.

**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0143831X16681483>

Naurin, Elin, Dietlind Stolle & Elias Markstedt. 2022. "The Effect of Pregnancy on Engagement with Politics. Toward a Model of the Political Consequences of the Earliest Stages of Parenthood." *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–7.

OECD. 2022. Part-time employment rate. Technical report.

**URL:** <https://data.oecd.org/emp/part-time-employment-rate.htm>

Offer, Shira. 2014. "The Costs of Thinking About Work and Family: Mental Labor, Work-Family Spillover, and Gender Inequality Among Parents in Dual-Earner Families." *Sociological Forum* 29(4):916–936.

**URL:** <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/socf.12126>

Plass, Jan L, Roxana Moreno & Roland Brünken. 2010. "Cognitive load theory."

Quaranta, Mario & Giulia M Dotti Sani. 2018. "Left Behind? Gender Gaps in Political Engagement Over the Life Course in Twenty-Seven European Countries." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 25(2):254–286.

**URL:** <https://academic.oup.com/sp/article/25/2/254/4851034>

Reid, Erin M. 2018. "Straying from breadwinning: Status and money in men's interpretations

of their wives' work arrangements." *Gender, Work & Organization* 25(6):718–733.

**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12265>

Roberts, Margaret E., Brandon M. Stewart, Dustin Tingley, Christopher Lucas, Jetson Leder-Luis, Shana Kushner Gadarian, Bethany Albertson & David G. Rand. 2014. "Structural Topic Models for Open-Ended Survey Responses." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4):1064–1082.

**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajps.12103>

Robertson, Lindsey G, Tamara L Anderson, M Elizabeth Lewis Hall & Christina Lee Kim. 2019. "Mothers and mental labor: A phenomenological focus group study of family-related thinking work." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 43(2):184–200.

Savelle, Alexandra E. & Karen M. O'Brien. 2016. "Predicting College Women's Career Plans: Instrumentality, Work, and Family." *Journal of Career Development* 43(4):335–348.

**URL:** <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0894845315602118>

Silbermann, Rachel. 2015. "Gender Roles, Work-Life Balance, and Running for Office." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 10(2):123–153.

**URL:** <http://www.nowpublishers.com/article/Details/QJPS-14087>

Simon, Herbert A. 1956. "Rational choice and the structure of the environment." *Psychological review* 63(2):129.

Säve-Söderbergh, Jenny. 2019. "Gender gaps in salary negotiations: Salary requests and starting salaries in the field." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 161:35–51.

**URL:** <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0167268119300290>

Teele, Dawn Langan, Joshua Kalla & Frances Rosenbluth. 2018. "The Ties That Double Bind: Social Roles and Women's Underrepresentation in Politics." *American Political*

*Science Review* 112(3):525–541.

**URL:** [https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003055418000217/type/journal\\_article](https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003055418000217/type/journal_article)

Verba, Sidney, Nancy Burns & Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1997. “Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement.” *The Journal of Politics* 59(4):1051–1072.

**URL:** <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.2307/2998592>

Voorpostel, M. & H. Coffe. 2012. “Transitions in Partnership and Parental Status, Gender, and Political and Civic Participation.” *European Sociological Review* 28(1):28–42.

**URL:** <https://academic.oup.com/esr/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/esr/jcq046>

Weeden, Kim A, Youngjoo Cha & Mauricio Bucca. 2016. “Long work hours, part-time work, and trends in the gender gap in pay, the motherhood wage penalty, and the fatherhood wage premium.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 2(4):71–102.

Weeks, Ana Catalano. 2023. “The Political Consequences of the Mental Load.”.

**URL:** [https://scholar.harvard.edu/sites/scholar.harvard.edu/files/anacweeks/files/weeks\\_m181023.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/sites/scholar.harvard.edu/files/anacweeks/files/weeks_m181023.pdf)

Wiesmann, Stephanie, Hennie Boeijs, Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes & Laura den Dulk. 2008. “‘Not worth mentioning’: The implicit and explicit nature of decision-making about the division of paid and domestic work.” *Community, Work & Family* 11(4):341–363.

**URL:** <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13668800802361781>

Williams, Joan C., Mary Blair-Loy & Jennifer L. Berdahl. 2013. “Cultural Schemas, Social Class, and the Flexibility Stigma: Cultural Schemas and Social Class.” *Journal of Social Issues* 69(2):209–234.

**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.12012>

Zimmerman, Toni Schindler, Shelley A. Haddock, Scott Ziemba & Aimee Rust. 2002. “Family Organizational Labor: Who’s Calling the Plays?” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*

13(2-3):65–90.

**URL:** *[http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J086v13n02\\_5](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J086v13n02_5)*

# Appendix

## Contents

A	Balance tests and additional specifications . . . . .	2
---	---	---

## A Balance tests and additional specifications

Table A1: Balance checks

	Control	Treated	Difference	P-value
Woman	0.49	0.51	-0.02	0.46
Higher education	0.62	0.63	-0.01	0.74
White	0.90	0.88	0.02	0.30
Age	40.17	40.56	-0.39	0.41
Works full time	0.76	0.75	0.01	0.74
Age of youngest child	6.97	6.97	0.00	1.00
Number of children living at home	1.69	1.75	-0.06	0.24
Mental load reported share	67.40	67.68	-0.28	0.83

Note: Entries for Control and Treated are mean values. The Difference column reports the differences in means (Treated minus Control) and the final column corresponding p-values according to t-tests.

Table A2: Effects of Mental Load Priming on Political Enagagement and Workplace Advancement

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>							
	Political Interest (1)	Political Ambition (2)	Vote intention (3)	Public participation (4)	Private participation (5)	Work advancement (6)	Work hours (7)	Partner work hours (8)
Treated	−0.06*** (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.04*** (0.02)	−0.05*** (0.02)	−0.03* (0.02)	−0.04*** (0.01)	−1.93*** (0.59)	−1.10 (0.68)
Constant	0.63*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.91*** (0.01)	0.29*** (0.01)	0.58*** (0.01)	0.70*** (0.01)	32.81*** (0.41)	30.98*** (0.47)
Observations	998	998	987	998	998	998	998	998
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	−0.001	0.01	0.01	0.002	0.01	0.01	0.002

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Table A3: Effects of Mental Load Priming on Political Enagagement and Workplace Advancement – Women only

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>							
	Political Interest (1)	Political Ambition (2)	Vote intention (3)	Public participation (4)	Private participation (5)	Work advancement (6)	Work hours (7)	Partner work hours (8)
Treated	−0.08*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	−0.05** (0.02)	−0.06*** (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.04* (0.02)	−1.55* (0.80)	−0.23 (0.79)
Constant	0.60*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.90*** (0.02)	0.28*** (0.01)	0.59*** (0.01)	0.66*** (0.01)	28.92*** (0.56)	33.47*** (0.55)
Observations	500	500	495	500	500	500	500	500
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	−0.002	0.01	0.02	0.002	0.004	0.01	−0.002

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Table A4: Effects of Mental Load Priming on Political Enagagement and Workplace Advancement – Men only

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>							
	Political	Political	Vote	Public	Private	Work	Work	Partner
	Interest	Ambition	intention	participation	participation	advancement	hours	work hours
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
treated	−0.04*	−0.02	−0.04*	−0.03	−0.03	−0.05***	−1.97***	−2.27**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.75)	(1.06)
Constant	0.67***	0.14***	0.92***	0.29***	0.56***	0.74***	36.55***	28.60***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.51)	(0.72)
Observations	497	497	491	497	497	497	497	497
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.005	0.001	0.004	0.002	0.001	0.01	0.01	0.01

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01