

# The political consequences of the mental load

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How do levels of cognitive household labour—the ‘mental load’ involved in anticipating, fulfilling, and monitoring household needs—affect political interest? The mental load is distinct from the physical tasks of e.g. cooking and cleaning, and thought to be disproportionately undertaken by women. I argue that while low levels of mental load can foster political interest, at high levels the mental (over)load crowds out cognitive space for political issues, especially issues distant from family life. To test this argument, I field a novel survey on politics and household work to a sample of parents in the United States. I find a large gender gap, with mothers reporting primary responsibility for 71 percent of cognitive household labour, compared to fathers’ 45 percent. Low levels of mental load are positively linked to political interest, while high levels of mental load decrease interest in certain issues, including national politics and inflation. I report similar effects for fathers and mothers, but due to the gendered distribution of mental load (mothers carrying more load, on average), negative consequences are much more common among mothers. The findings offer new evidence about a gender gap too often hidden, and its consequences for political life.

Gender gaps in political life are intractable. In the United States, women report less political interest, participate less in political discussions and public actions, and show less political ambition than men (Burns et al., 2002; Lawless and Fox, 2010; Preece, 2016). Similar patterns are observed worldwide, including Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America (Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2012; Prillaman, 2023). Scholars are increasingly examining the role of gender in the household as a factor influencing political activity (Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010; Bernhard, Shames and Teele, 2021; Naurin, Stolle and Markstedt, 2022). To date, however, little attention has been given to one hidden source of political inequality: the mental load.

The mental load is the cognitive labour of anticipating, fulfilling, and monitoring household needs (Daming, 2019). It includes remembering schedules, arranging services, managing finances, finding child care, and juggling priorities (Robertson et al., 2019). The concept gained attention after the 2017 comic by French feminist cartoonist Emma,<sup>1</sup> and sociological research has since explored it conceptually (Daming,

2019). So far, few studies measure the mental load quantitatively (but see Haupt and Gelbgiser, 2023; Aviv et al., 2024; Weeks and Ruppner, 2024; Helgøy and Weeks, 2025), and none examine its descriptive link to political interest, a key form of political engagement. This matters because we might be underestimating gender gaps in household labour and their implications for equality in public life.

As a first step, this study uses an original survey of 3,000 U.S. parents to shed new light on how cognitive household labor relates to political interest. While the mental load persists across the life course (Dean, Churchill and Ruppner, 2022), parents are a relevant group due to significant mental loads and widening gender gaps in political engagement (Voorpostel and Coffé, 2012; Naurin, Stolle and Markstedt, 2022). I focus on the following research questions. First, how does the mental load differ by gender? Second, how does it affect political interest among mothers and fathers? The United States, a liberal welfare state with scant federal support for parents, offers an extreme case. I expect the gender gap in the mental load is large. Building on Greenlee’s (2014) conception of ‘politicized motherhood’ as a complex identity that can both reinforce traditional gender norms and create new, politically relevant skills and interests, I argue that

1 ‘You Should’ve Asked’, by Emma, 20 May 2017.

the relationship between domestic mental load and political engagement is nonlinear. Taking some responsibility for mental tasks can build certain skills, social capital, and efficacy relevant to political life. However, such cognitive labour has diminishing returns and eventually leads to overload, crowding out space for political interests.

I find evidence of a large gender gap in cognitive household labour among parents. Mothers report primary responsibility for 71 percent of cognitive household labour, while fathers report responsibility for 45 percent. This gender gap of 26 percentage points is larger than the gender gap estimated in share of physical household labour, and it has important implications for politics. As expected, I find that high levels of the mental load are linked to decreases in certain forms of political interest among parents, such as interest in national issues and inflation. Because mothers take on the majority of mental load work, these negative consequences impact mothers more than fathers. At the same time, the mental load can have positive impacts as well. Among mothers, for example, it is positively linked to interest in gun control—an issue with clear links to family care given the US epidemic of school shootings. And at low levels, I find that the mental load is often positively linked to political engagement among both mothers and fathers.

In summary, the main contributions of the study are: (1) to offer a new quantitative method of measuring the mental load; (2) to deepen our understanding of the political consequences of gendered household work by examining the link between the mental load and political interest, and; (3) to consider how the impacts of the mental load vary by the nature of the political issue. Overall, the results highlight the enduring relevance of the household division of labour to equality in political life and the need to move beyond time-based measures in order to measure such unpaid labour accurately.

## Gender and the mental load

Women continue to do the bulk of household labour across nearly every context in the world. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 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, relative income in the household, and when the gender wage gap is relatively smaller (Fuwa, 2004; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010; Ferrant, Pesando and Nowacka, 2014). According to household bargaining theories, when women have greater outside options, they have more negotiating power at home, and men begin to take on more of the physical household work (Becker, 1985; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010).

The same dynamics might not hold for gender gaps in cognitive household labour. This is because cognitive labour is harder to outsource than physical household labour, 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 and other household help require someone to manage all of the services and the day-to-day schedules of family members—typically, the mother (Sherman, 2017). Further, the work itself tends to be invisible. As Daminger (2019) explains, cognitive labour 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 labour, even if very gender-egalitarian partners want to do so.

In addition, the rise of intensive mothering has affected middle and upper class women in particular (Hays, 1996). This dominant paradigm in Western democracies 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 (Damasko, 2013). Women but not men are socialized to be the ones ultimately responsible for family life—and likely to be judged by their peers if they do not adhere to these norms (Thébaud, Kornrich and Ruppner, 2021).

Men, conversely, face different social pressures. The role of fatherhood is shifting quickly; many fathers want to be more involved in their children's lives (for an overview, see Grau Grau, las Heras Maestro and Riley Bowles, 2022). Yet men still face intense pressure to be 'ideal workers' and breadwinners, and often feel unable to take up policies such as flexible working or parental leave (when available) due to risks of stigmatization (Tanquerel and Grau-Grau, 2020).

In other words, although norms are changing, women and men still face different social pressures about how much to engage at home versus in public life. Some research argues that maternal 'gatekeeping' reifies such gender divisions (Allen and Hawkins, 1999), while other scholars suggest that men strategically perform incompetence in order to avoid such work (Miller, 2018). While the drivers of ongoing inequalities are thus debated, scholars agree that household and care work tends to take up more of women's attention. The first hypothesis is thus:

H1: Women report higher mental loads than men.

## The mental load and political engagement

In the current study, I concentrate on how cognitive household labour might impact interest in a range of political issues. Like cognitive household labour, political interest is a mental state. If the mental load

affects political participation, I expect to observe it first in feelings about wanting to pay attention to politics, an important initial step that sets the stage for further political participation (Verba, Burns, N. and Schlozman, 1997).

Previous studies find consistent gender gaps in political engagement in countries around the world, with women reporting less interest (Verba, Burns, N. and Schlozman, 1997; Burns et al., 2002; Fraile and Gomez, 2017a; Fraile and Sánchez-Vitores, 2020; Wolak, 2020), lower levels of political knowledge (Dolan, 2011; Carpini and Keeter, 2016; Fraile and Gomez, 2017b; Ferrín, Fraile and García-Albacete, 2019), and lower internal political efficacy (Fraile and de Miguel Moyer, 2022; Oser, Feitosa and Dassonneville, 2023) than men. Scholars have long theorized that gender-based inequalities in the division of household labour are part of the explanation: if women spend more time on household tasks, this leaves them with fewer opportunities to engage with politics. Yet, the few studies that link household labour to political participation directly report mixed findings. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (1997, 2002) find no link between the percentage of housework done and political activity in the United States; however, having more leisure time is associated with greater participation for men. Sartori, Tuorto and Ghigi (2017)'s study of Italy reports a negative link between time spent in domestic work and political activities for women, but not for men. Finally, in the study perhaps most closely related to the current investigation, Helgøy and Weeks (2025) take an experimental approach, priming some survey respondents to think about their own mental loads. They find a strong negative effect of mental load priming on intentions to engage in politics and at work among parents in the UK.

Other research shows that becoming a parent and the presence of young children affect mothers and fathers in different ways—potentially, due to gender differences in unpaid work following the birth of a child. Analysis of political engagement in 27 European countries finds that gender differences in political interest are largest among couples with children (Quaranta and Dotti Sani, 2018). Having a child is associated with less voting frequency for women but not men (Voorpostel and 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 and Markstedt, 2022). The dampening effect of parenthood for women is also seen at higher levels of political participation, like running for office. For example, mothers with breadwinning responsibility, who despite this still tend to undertake more housework than their partners, are especially unlikely to run for office (Bernhard, Shames and Teele, 2021).

While past studies have perceived household constraints mainly in terms of time spent in physical household labour or parenthood, I propose that cognitive household labour also matters to political engagement. How might the political consequences of mental household work differ from the physical side of this labour? While I expect both to affect political engagement, I offer two main points of distinction here which provide good reason to study the mental dimension. First, physical labour is discrete and often confined to the home. The mental load, conversely, is carried with us throughout the day and often performed outside of the home (on the commute, at work, when trying to sleep). Therefore, because it cannot easily be compartmentalized or left behind, the mental load may have a more pervasive impact on an individual's cognitive bandwidth and energy.

Second, while gender differences in physical household work have been decreasing in recent decades (Altintas and Sullivan, 2017) and tend to narrow or equalize when women are the primary breadwinners (Chesley and Flood, 2017), I do not expect this to be true for mental household labour. Instead, awareness of the concept of mental household work is only emerging and studies suggest it is deeply gendered even among egalitarian couples who strive to share physical household work (Damingier, 2020). This leads one recent study to conclude that, 'even among equally sharing parents, mothers keep track of the calendar and remain "in charge" of work at home' (Pinho and Gaunt, 2021, pp. 319); that is, the mental load can be viewed as another way of performing gender (Weeks and Ruppner, 2024). The mental load thus illuminates a different aspect of inequality which cannot be captured by measuring physical household labour alone. Together, these distinct characteristics of the mental load suggest that it might have unique implications for political engagement and deserves closer empirical attention.

Building on Greenlee's (2014) theory of 'politicized motherhood', I argue that the relationship between the mental load and political engagement is complex and nonlinear. Greenlee claims that motherhood can both reify traditional, feminine identities through gendered social expectations regarding care and housework, and at the same time create new politically relevant skills and interests (see also Elder and Greene, 2012). For example, taking responsibility for household financial management builds knowledge about the family's economic situation which can inform policy attitudes related to e.g. economic security, employment, health, and education (Hacker, Rehm and Schlesinger, 2013). The work of maintaining social relationships or 'kin-keeping', as well as mental work related to child care and scheduling (organizing, 'for instance, the "school run", childcare "swaps", baby-sitting, shared childrens

outings, emergency care, and the taking and fetching and watching of children in their school and club activities' (Lowndes, 2000, p.534) can create networks, trust, and social capital, and form the basis of community organization (Lowndes, 2000; Sapiro, 2013).

These stronger community attachments tend to enhance political participation (Strate et al., 1989). One recent example is parents organizing against children's mobile phone use, where parent groups originating in local WhatsApp chats have started nationwide movements and informed policy decisions to ban phones at schools.<sup>2</sup> While I expect that the mental load is disproportionately done by women, I see no reason to believe that women and men who carry similar mental loads respond to this differently. For both men and women, then, I expect:

H2: At low levels, the mental load is positively linked to political interest.

However, scholars note that these household management roles, associated with adulthood, are likely to have different effects for men and women (Ferrín, Fraile and García-Albacete, 2019). As discussed above, becoming a parent and parenting small children especially tends to reduce women but not men's engagement. I argue that one reason for these observed differences could be that taking on most, or all, of the work to manage a family and household brings negative consequences. At a certain point the benefits associated with household management—increased skills, efficacy, networks, awareness—diminish and cognitive *overload* can decrease political engagement. High levels of mental load can 'crowd out' cognitive space for other activities, including but not limited to engaging with political life. The notion of 'bounded rationality' holds that individuals have only limited knowledge and computational capacity, and therefore must be selective in searching for information (Simon, 1956). Similarly, cognitive load theory suggests that humans have finite working memory, and so there are constraints on how much new information individuals can register and use in conscious activities (Miller, 1956). The mental load, as one form of cognitive fatigue, could reduce the desire to acquire new information—particularly if politics is considered a hobby or leisure activity (Hjermitslev and Johnston, 2023). With more of one's head space taken up by household management, it could be more difficult, and less rewarding, to follow political issues.

At what point does the mental load become too high and begin to negatively impact political engagement?

Previous studies do not offer a specific threshold, and this remains an empirical question (one I return to in the analysis). However, equity theory suggests that individuals tend to value, if not necessarily parity, fairness in the division of labour (Rapson and Hatfield, 2012). Fairness perceptions can take into account overall time availability, such that individuals might believe it is fair for one partner to work more hours in the home if the other works more hours outside the home (Koster et al., 2022). Yet, the mental load is not measured in units of time and not restricted to the home. This ambiguity can make it hard to assess its fairness—which might actually increase the psychological burden, if mental work goes unrecognized within the family. Recent research demonstrates that individuals are more accepting of mental loads centred around the halfway mark as one indicator of equity (Petts, Carlson and Wong, 2025). Taking on significantly more than this (e.g. two-thirds or three-quarters of the load) might be perceived as less fair and more overwhelming. Therefore, the more mental load increases from parity, the more we might expect it becomes a psychological burden that can impact investment in other interests.

Because cognitive household labour is a relatively new concept, I find little previous evidence directly related to how it might affect political interest. However, in focus groups preceding the 2005 British general 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 it (p. 55). Interestingly, these women 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 domestic mental (over-)load demands can drain energy and attention away from taking an interest in politics:

H3: At high levels, the mental load is negatively linked to political interest.

Further, I expect that H3 is conditioned by the nature of the specific political issue. Gender gaps in political interest often do not persist when considering interest in local issues, as opposed to national or international issues (Campbell and Winters, 2008; Coffé, 2013). This might be because women's greater involvement in household work gives them more exposure to certain kinds of local politics, like schools and local health issues. Studies also find that women report higher levels of political interest and knowledge when asked about specific political issues, especially those that are particularly relevant to women's lives, such as

2 E.g. Wilson, Joseph and Laurie Kellman. 'Should young kids have smartphones? These parents in Europe linked arms and said no', *AP*, 21 June 2024.

abortion, as opposed to more general issues (Ferrín et al., 2020; Tormos and Verge, 2022; Kraft and Dolan, 2023). Further evidence comes from the mothers interviewed in Greenlee's (2014) study. For example, one mother said, '... I used to subscribe to Ms. Magazine, and it was all about national politics, And I think "wow, I used to read that?"... And I still do, but its on the back burner to the local stuff' (Greenlee, 2014, p180). Others brought up public schools, the right to breastfeed, and gun control as political issues activated by different stages of parenthood. I thus expect:

H4: High levels of mental load are more likely to decrease political interest in general political issues perceived to be distant from family life than local political issues well-connected to family life.

In summary, I argue that the effects of the mental load are curvilinear: while low levels of the mental load are generally positive for political interest, high levels of mental load crowd out cognitive space for political issues, especially general issues perceived to be distant from family life. These relationships should operate similarly for mothers and fathers; that is, fathers who take on the vast majority of mental load can also be expected to reduce political engagement. Yet, given the unequal distribution of mental load in households (women carrying more load than men, on average), the negative political impacts of the mental load ought to affect more women than men.

### **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. Few existing studies measure the mental load quantitatively. This type of labour is not captured well by time-use studies which ask respondents to indicate how many minutes they spend on different tasks, because the planning and monitoring that goes into managing a household are often secondary or tertiary activities. It is very hard to identify how much time such nebulous and ongoing work takes, but easier to identify who tends to do different mental tasks.

To make progress on this, I designed a novel task-based measure of the mental load, which was fielded to a sample of parents in the United States. As the liberal welfare state offering the lowest level of state support for parents among its peers (White, 2009), the United States is an extreme case. This is useful for studying a relatively new and invisible concept like the domestic mental load, because I expect to find larger mental loads in a context where the state provides virtually no support for caring work. The current study focuses on parents. While the mental load endures throughout the

life course, and not just among parents, this labour naturally compounds when there are dependent children to be cared for. In addition, gender gaps in pay and promotion intensify on the birth of a child (Kleven et al., 2019; Goldin, 2021), suggesting that it is a critical life stage for understanding gender-based inequalities.

The survey was fielded in February and March of 2023 via the survey firm Dynata. The sample of 3,000 respondents was selected to mirror the US population of parents with respect to age, race/ethnicity, gender, and education. Unlike previous work which tends to focus on different-sex couples, the sample includes individuals from same- and different-sex couples, as well as single parents. It thus offers new evidence that reflects the diverse population of US parents on certain Census-based characteristics; at the same time, because the data is not drawn from a probability-based sample it might be unrepresentative on other variables. Tables A1 and A2 in the Supplemental Material (SM) provide an overview of the representativeness of the sample and summary statistics.

The survey starts by asking respondents a series of questions about their interest in different political issues. I ask the political questions first because questions about household labour might prime gender and parenthood status, affecting responses to political questions in an undesirable way (Klar, 2013). Because thus far we know very little about the consequences of the mental load for political engagement, I investigate a range of potential issues. Some of these are more abstract (local, national, and international issues), while some are specific (abortion, gun control, inflation). Per H4, I expect high mental load to negatively influence abstract issues or those which are not clearly related to family life (national issues, international issues, inflation), whereas I expect high mental load can positively influence interest in issues seen to be deeply connected to family life (local issues, gun control). Abortion is included as an interest particularly relevant for women (Yildirim, 2022; see also Figure 2), but the potential impact of high mental load is unclear. While most parents are likely to consider the problem of guns in schools, abortion might be perceived as less relevant to the day-to-day lives of families with dependent children.

After the questions about political interest, I introduce the idea that household work can have physical and mental aspects. I ask respondents to estimate the hours they spend doing care and other types of household work on a typical day, and to estimate the share of physical household labour that they personally do within their household. These questions allow me to assess how gender differences in household physical labour compare to those in cognitive household labour.

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 draw on previous qualitative research describing the cycle of cognitive labour in the household: anticipating needs, identifying options and making decisions, and monitoring progress (Daminger, 2019). The questionnaire asks a series of questions that correspond with these three components, for seven types of cognitive household labour: scheduling, child care, social relationships, cleaning, food, finances, and home maintenance (21 items in total).<sup>3</sup> These categories are not exhaustive, but represent the majority of the nine cognitive labour domains identified by Daminger (2019).<sup>4</sup> 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 include: 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*).<sup>5</sup>

I then construct a composite measure of the mental load for each person by summing the total number of items that an individual says is done by ‘Mostly me’ and dividing this by the number of items overall (removing ‘not applicable’ items from the denominator).<sup>6</sup> A similar approach has been found to be effective at measuring issue preferences (Ansolahehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008). The basic idea is that multiple questions—here of different aspects of the domestic mental load, which mirror accounts from qualitative studies—reduce measurement error. Cronbach’s Alpha of the 21 items making up the mental load scale is 0.92, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Relying on primary responsibility (‘mostly me’ responses only) means losing some information, but it offers important advantages. First, it provides a straightforward measure of (perceived) individual responsibility for cognitive labour tasks. Second, previous studies of couples find inconsistencies in the amount of household work reported by husbands, but less so for wives (Lee and Waite, 2005; Yavorsky, Kamp

Dush and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). While men view household work as equally shared, this is not borne out in the time diary data. The same overestimation among fathers is found for the domestic mental load (Helgøy, 2024; Weeks and Ruppner, 2024). This could suggest that fathers feel social desirability bias to inflate levels of household work, and using the ‘shared equally’ category is one way of doing so. Therefore, I believe relying on ‘mostly me’ responses is more accurate. Nonetheless, and because it is impossible to observe the reality of this work that goes on within one’s mind, I also provide results using a different operationalization of the mental load which includes ‘shared equally’ responses (see SM Tables C11–C12).

### Describing the mental load among U.S. Parents

I begin by providing evidence to support the expectation that the mental load is highly gendered. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the mental load among fathers and mothers. In line with H1, mothers report primary responsibility for 71 percent of the mental load on average, while fathers say that they are mostly responsible for 45 percent (a gender gap of 26 percentage points). A T-test shows that this gender difference is statistically significant. As Figure 1 shows, the distribution of mental load is skewed differently for fathers and mothers: for fathers, the median mental load (38%) is lower than the mean, while for mothers the median mental load (76%) is higher than the mean. The task-based measure of the mental load is also highly correlated with respondents’ own assessments of their overall share of mental load (see section A of the SM for a discussion of this validation check).

How do gender gaps in cognitive household labour compare to gender gaps in physical household labour? On average, mothers report doing 75% of physical household labour compared to fathers’ 62%, a gender gap of 13 percentage points. Considering instead time spent in both care and other household work, the mean gender difference in hours per week is 25 hours, which translates into 15 percentage points.<sup>7</sup> While both gender gaps are thus sizable and statistically significant, they are smaller than the 26-percentage-point gender gap reported for cognitive household labour. The gender gap in mental load work appears even larger than gender gaps in physical household labour.

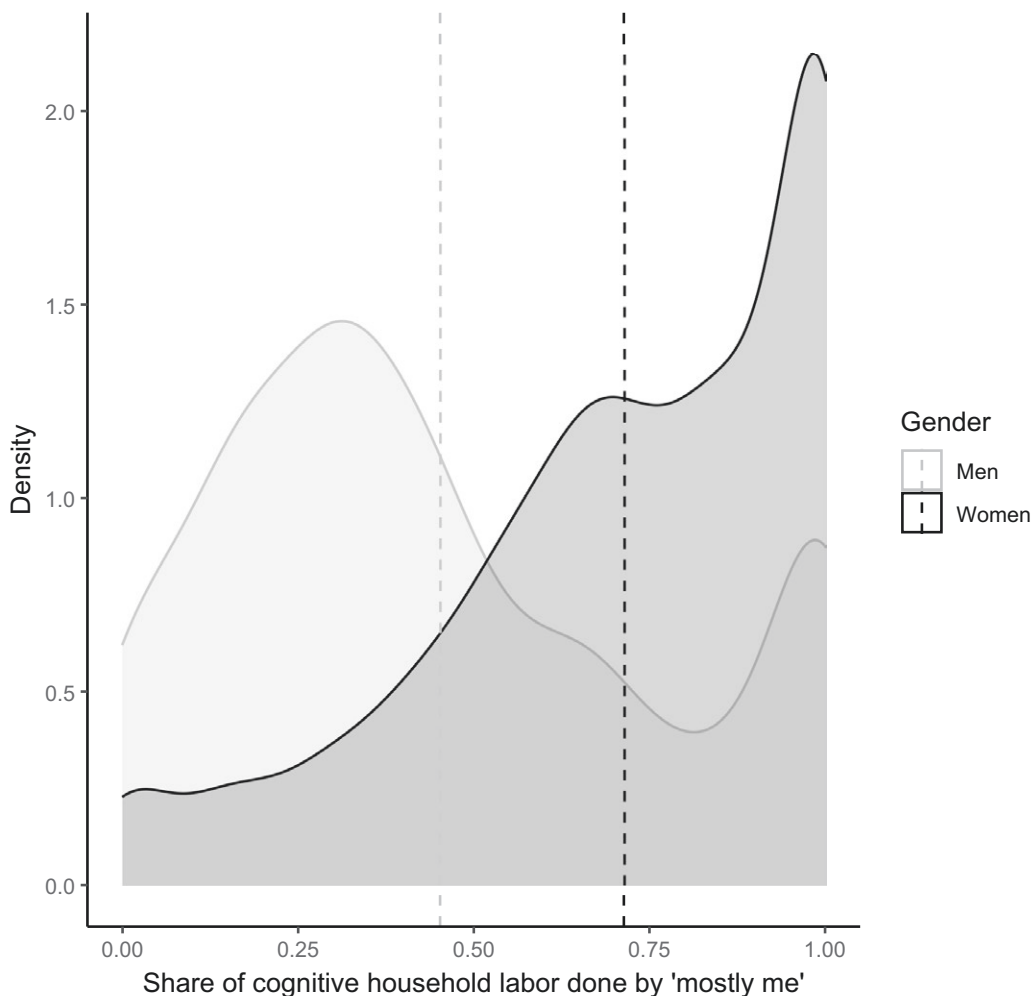
3 I randomly vary the order of the types of cognitive household labour.

4 To save space / avoid survey fatigue, I leave out ‘shopping/purchasing’ and ‘travel/leisure’. Both are domains which tend to be women-led (Damingier 2019), meaning that if anything my measure could underestimate the share of mental load done by mothers.

5 See SM section A for the full list of mental task survey items.

6 The average number of ‘not applicable’ responses among the 21 items is 0.7, suggesting that the vast majority of items are relevant.

7 Welch Two Sample t-tests find that these gender differences are both statistically significant.



**Figure 1** Gender differences in mental household labour

Notes: Vertical lines show means for fathers and mothers.

### The mental load and political engagement: empirical strategy and results

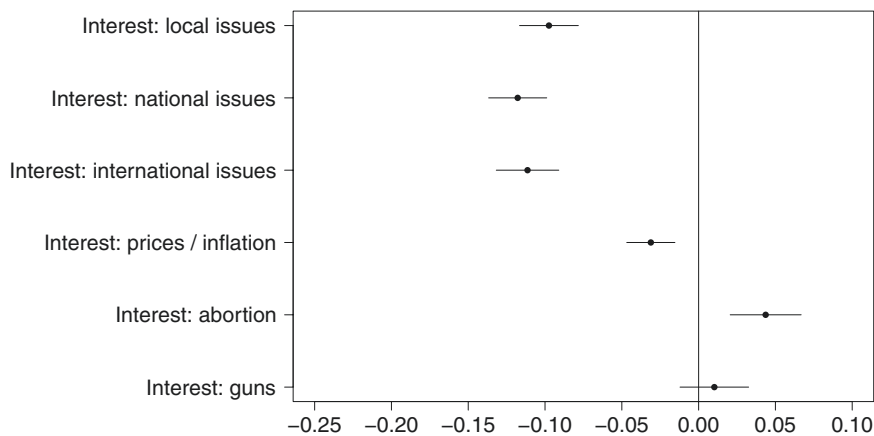
So far, I have established that gender gaps in the mental load among parents are large. How does this matter for political interest? To describe and compare average gender gaps in political life, I estimate OLS regressions separately for different types of political interest.<sup>8</sup> For ease of interpretation, I rescale these variables to range between 0 and 1, where higher values refer to greater interest. To measure baseline gender gaps in political engagement, I deliberately do not control for other covariates such as education or income because these

can be considered ‘post-treatment’, occurring after gender identity is ‘assigned’ (Sen and Wasow, 2016).

Figure 2 presents the gender differences in political interest, based on bivariate OLS regressions (see Table C1 in SM). Figure 2 shows that mothers report less interest in local, national, and international political issues, and inflation / prices compared to fathers, but more interest in abortion. No significant gender difference is reported for interest in gun control. These results are consistent with previous research showing that gender gaps narrow when respondents are asked about specific issues, especially those related to women’s life experiences (Tormos and Verge, 2022; Kraft and Dolan, 2023).

Given the starkly different distributions of mental load observed for fathers versus mothers in Figure 1, I split the sample by gender in subsequent multivariate analyses. The median values of mental load differ

8 The text of survey questions can be found in the SM, section A.



**Figure 2** Impact of Gender (Woman) on Political Engagement Among U.S. Parents

Notes: Coefficients from OLS Analysis with 95% CIs (regressions shown in [Supplemental Material Table C1](#)).

substantially between mothers and fathers -- 76% for mothers and 38% for fathers -- and so stratifying the sample ensures that the distinct distributions of mental load are appropriately accounted for in the analysis. Pooling the samples and relying solely on interaction terms assumes comparability in mental load levels across genders, which is not reflected in the data (i.e. there are few mothers at the bottom of the mental load distribution, and few fathers at the top of it) and thus might miss nuances in these relationships. Further, the stratified approach offers a clear interpretation of how the mental load relates to political interest among mothers and fathers, allowing me to calculate quantities of interest relevant to the appropriate underlying distributions of the mental load for each group.

I estimate a series of OLS models regressing political interest on share of the mental load among mothers and fathers. To account for the curvilinear form of the relationship hypothesized, I include a quadratic transformation of the mental load variable for the majority of specifications. I confirm that the quadratic term improves model fit by comparing the AIC information criterion in models with and without this transformation.<sup>9</sup> This is the main explanatory variable.

My theoretical argument makes the case for a causal relationship between the mental load and political engagement which is very difficult to prove with observational data. While I cannot resolve this problem—and the analysis here should be interpreted as descriptive—I carefully identify and control for

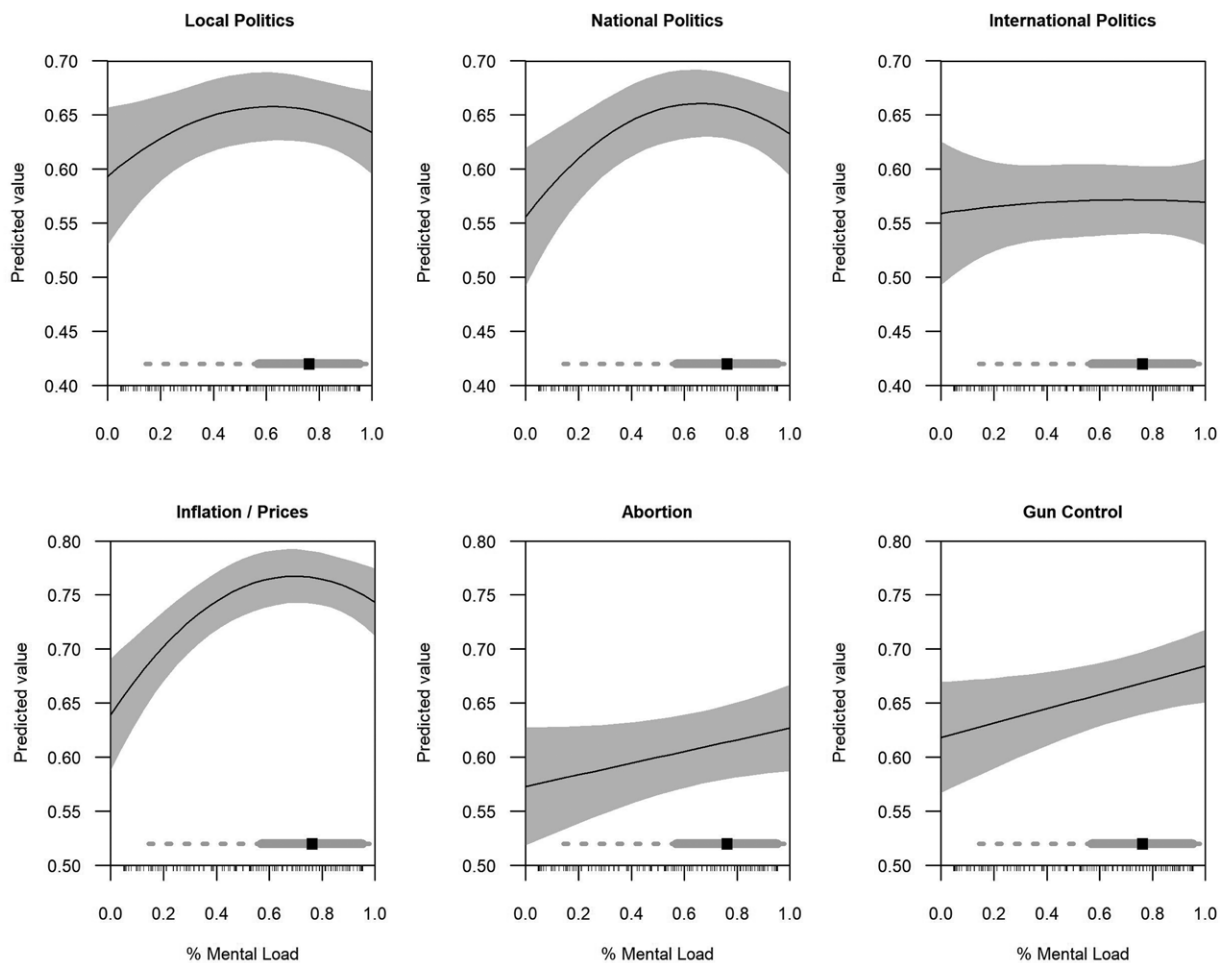
potential confounding variables which could affect both mental load and political engagement. These include significant determinants of the mental load among mothers and fathers: having a partner, age, ethnic identity, young children, sexual orientation, and voting Democrat (to save space, analysis of the determinants of mental load is presented in section B of the SM). I also control for a battery of characteristics that previous studies suggest could impact political interest: number of children, employment, income, and higher education (Verba, Burns, N. and Schlozman, 1997; Coffé, 2013). Finally, I control for the self-reported share of physical household labour, as my argument makes the case that this is conceptually distinct from the mental load.<sup>10</sup>

In order to translate the results into meaningful quantities of interest (King, Tomz and Wittenberg, 2000), I calculate the predicted values of the dependent variables—interest in different political issues—across values of the mental load. The predicted values plots shown in [Figures 3](#) (mothers) and [4](#) (fathers) are calculated from OLS regression specifications that include all covariates listed above (regressions shown in [Tables C2 and C3 of SM](#)). The dot and lines at the bottom of the plots in [Figures 3](#) and [4](#) display the median (dot), interquartile range (solid line; 25th to 75th percentile), and spread (dotted line; 5th to 95th percentile) of mental load.

Starting with mothers, in line with H2 [Figure 3](#) suggests that at low levels the mental load is positively

<sup>9</sup> Model fit improves for every issue except gun control for mothers and abortion for mothers and fathers. For these specifications, no quadratic transformation is included (see [Tables C2 and C3 in SM](#)). Scatterplots of the raw data confirm the same curvilinear trends.

<sup>10</sup> As with cognitive household labour, the relationship between physical household labour and political engagement is often curvilinear, particularly for mothers (see SM section C for details).



**Figure 3** Predicted Values of Political Interest by Share of Mental Load, Mothers

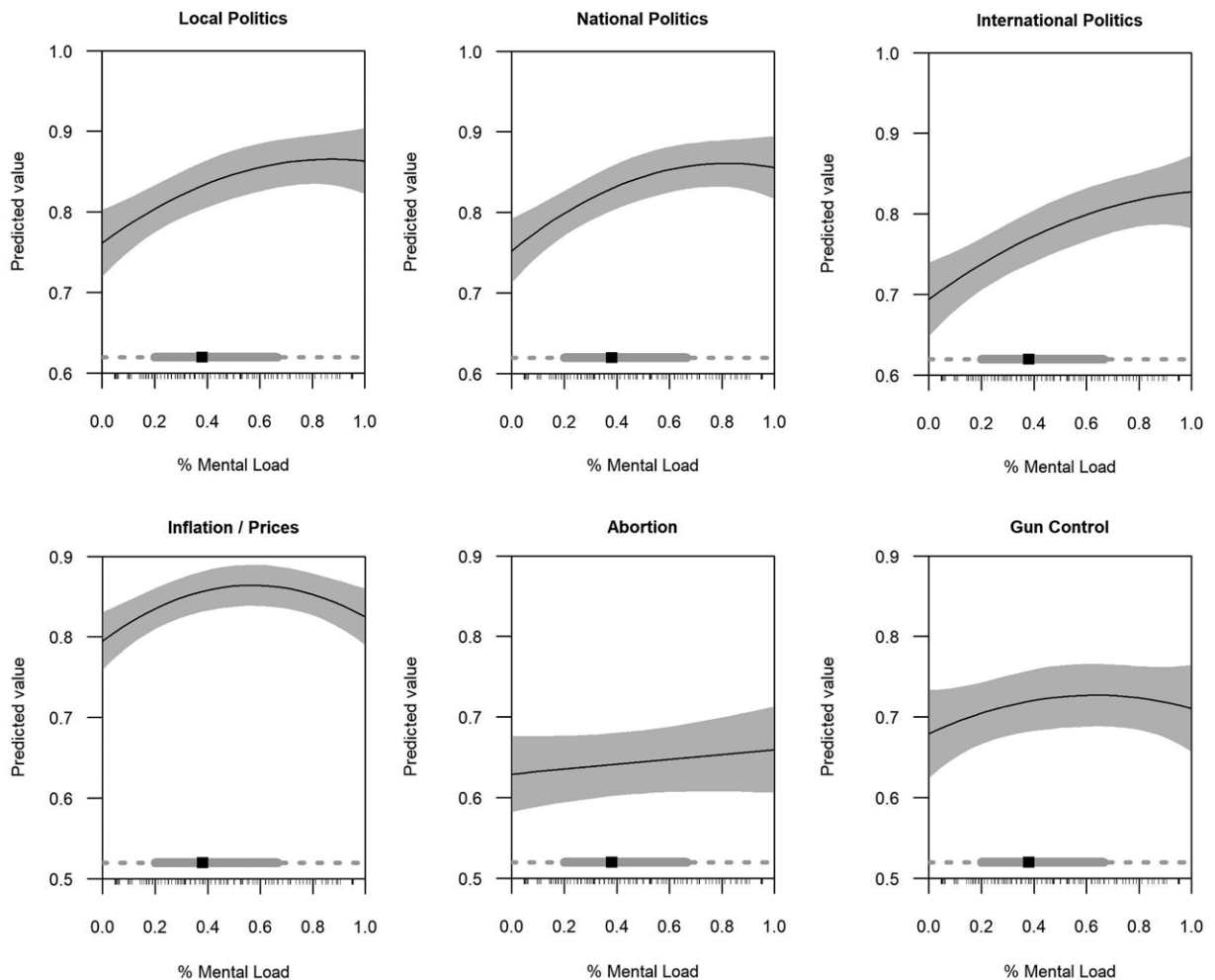
*Predicted values calculated from regression models shown in [Supplemental Material Table C2](#).*

linked to several types of political interest. For example, the link between the mental load and interest in national politics is positive and significant until the share of the mental load reaches 54%.<sup>11</sup> Given the skewed distribution of mental load among mothers (the median value is 76%), this finding applies to 24% of mothers. Turning to high levels of the mental load (H3), [Figure 3](#) shows that high levels of the mental load are negatively correlated with interest in several issues. The slope at the median value of mental load for mothers is negative for 4 of the 6 forms of political interest (see also [Table 1](#)). This negative link becomes

statistically significant at high levels for interest in national issues and prices / inflation. These significant negative effects emerge for levels of mental load of: 96% (interest in national issues) and 88% (interest in prices / inflation). Given the left-skewed distribution of the mental load among mothers, these shares of the mental load reduce political engagement for between 28% and 52% of mothers in my data. Partially confirming H3, high mental loads significantly decrease some types of political engagement among mothers.

To give a sense of relative effect size of cognitive ‘overload’, moving from the mean share of the mental load share to one standard deviation above reduces mothers’ interest in national politics and inflation / prices by 2 percentage points each. Considering the size of the gender gap on these issues, such a change corresponds to 17% of the gender gap in interest in

11 Thresholds are calculated from average marginal effects and associated confidence intervals at specified values of the mental load, holding all other covariates at their means or modes.



**Figure 4** Predicted Values of Political Interest by Share of Mental Load, Fathers

Predicted values calculated from regression models shown in [Supplemental Material Table C3](#).

national politics and 66% of the smaller gender gap in interest in inflation / prices. It is important to note that high levels of physical household labour are also linked to lower political interest, particularly in local and national issues. However, the average marginal effects across values of physical household labour reveal no significant negative relationship even at high levels. While the relationship is in the expected direction, without including the mental load one would have an incomplete picture about the significant consequences of domestic work for political interest.

Figure 3 also demonstrates that high levels of mental load are *positively* linked to interest in gun control. The regression on interest in gun control does not require a quadratic transformation of the mental load; the model fit is better without it. For interest in gun

control then, a one unit increase in mental load is associated with a 0.07 unit increase in interest. Gun control is an issue that resonates strongly with women's social roles as mothers as a child-protection measure, and this has spurred many U.S. mothers to political activism—see, e.g. the Million Mom March and Moms Demand Action (Goss, 2003). It follows that mothers who bear the primary responsibility for the mental load, which likely includes thinking about their children's safety, would be all the more interested in gun control. Together, the results provide partial evidence for H4, that high levels of mental load decrease interest especially in general, abstract political issues (for mothers, effects are found for national issues and inflation) but not in issues interconnected with family life (the reverse effect is found for gun control).

**Table 1** Average Marginal Effects of Median and High Mental Load on Political Engagement

	Median Mental Load		High Mental Load (80th percentile)	
	(Mothers) (1)	(Fathers) (2)	(Mothers) (3)	(Fathers) (4)
Interest: local issues	-0.047 (0.043)	0.135*** (0.030)	-0.127 (0.081)	0.031 (0.043)
Interest: national issues	-0.050 (0.043)	0.142*** (0.029)	-0.166* (0.081)	0.0195 (0.041)
Interest: international issues	-0.003 (0.045)	0.158*** (0.033)	-0.015 (0.084)	0.079 (0.048)
Interest: prices / inflation	-0.033 (0.035)	0.081** (0.026)	-0.160* (0.065)	-0.081* (0.038)
Interest: abortion	0.054 (0.033)	0.003 (0.032)	0.054 (0.033)	0.003 (0.032)
Interest: guns	0.066* (0.031)	0.061 (0.040)	0.066* (0.031)	-0.032 (0.057)

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Finally, no statistically significant link is reported between the mental load and interest in local issues, international issues, or abortion. The patterns observed for interest in local issues follow the same reverse U-shape observed for national issues, and the quadratic term is significant at the  $p = 0.06$  level. Contrary to H4, high mental load is associated with less interest in local politics, rather than more, and this warrants further consideration. While local governments in the U.S. play an important role in administering some services directly tied to family needs (e.g. public schools), mothers experiencing high mental load may perceive these institutions as less effective in addressing their concerns. We might find different results in countries where local governments offer more family policies, such as child care or early childcare education, but this is not typically the case in the US. Alternatively, 'local' issues might be perceived as too abstract and not sufficiently related to family wellbeing in the way that, e.g. gun control is. Future research could explore how perceptions of local politics might shape these dynamics. Considering international issues and abortion, these are the issues characterized by the lowest level of interest among those tested (see Table A2 in SM), and so it is perhaps not surprising that the mental load does not significantly influence attention towards these issues which might seem less relevant to day-to-day life.

Turning to fathers, recall that for fathers the distribution of relative mental load is reversed—the median share is 38%. Keeping this in mind, as observed among

mothers and in line with H2, at low levels the mental load is positively linked to political interest. The slope at the median value of mental load for fathers is *positive* for each of the 6 forms of political interest. Significant effects are observed for 4 of the 6: interest in local, national, and international issues, and inflation / prices.<sup>12</sup> Figure 4 shows that very high levels of mental load also tend to decrease political interest, and among fathers this is statistically significant for interest in inflation / prices (above 72% of mental load)—offering partial evidence for H3. Finally, no significant link is observed between the mental load and interest in abortion or gun control among fathers.

Table 1 summarizes the results, reporting the average marginal effects (slopes) of the mental load at median and high values (80th percentile), for mothers and fathers. The results in Table 1 highlight the importance of considering the gendered *composition* of mental load—the level of mental load borne by mothers and fathers—when interpreting the relationship between mental load, gender, and political engagement. For mothers, the median value of mental load is 76% and 80th percentile is 100%, while for fathers the median value is 38% and 80th percentile is 76%. This disparity reflects deep inequalities in household management work, which is overwhelmingly socially ascribed to mothers.

Table 1 reveals important gender differences in the slopes and thresholds of the mental load's 'effects'. While fathers tend to experience positive associations between mental load and political interest at median levels, mothers' median mental load (which is double that of fathers) is already associated with negative effects for most forms of engagement. The exceptions are abortion and gun control, neither of which are characterized by a traditional gender gap. This divergence in slopes suggests that fathers may benefit from taking on a moderate share of the household burden, as it potentially fosters civic awareness and engagement, but without crossing into the high mental load levels that are linked to negative effects. Mothers, conversely, are more likely to experience the high mental load levels that are shown to reduce certain types of political engagement, such as interest in national issues and inflation/prices. These findings suggest that mental load functions as a pathway through which gendered differences in political engagement emerge, as mothers are disproportionately likely to bear the extreme levels of mental load that hinder engagement. Further, because the highest levels of political interest for both

12 The thresholds of mental load below which these positive effects are significant are as follows: local issues (65%); national issues (64%); international issues (73%); inflation / prices (47%).

mothers and fathers tend to be found at middling levels of mental load (40–60%; see [Figures 3 and 4](#)), a more equitable mental load divide is likely to have positive consequences for political engagement among both mothers and fathers.

### Sensitivity checks

I conduct several sensitivity checks. First, results are robust to specifications excluding controls (see [SM Tables C4–C5](#)). Second, results are robust to models that use ordered logistic regression instead of OLS ([Tables C6 and C7](#)). Third, I make the case that while the relationship between mental load and interest is curvilinear, mothers and fathers respond similarly to different levels of load; the gender difference I expect is in the composition of mental load, rather than the functional form of the relationship between mental load and political interest. That is, mothers are more likely to reach high levels of mental load, which are associated with disengagement, whereas fathers are more likely to remain in the range where mental load has positive or neutral effects. I confirm this by presenting models including interactions between gender and mental load (base and quadratic terms) in [Table C8](#) of the SM. The same curvilinear patterns persist, and are statistically significant for local issues, national issues, and inflation prices, but the interaction terms are never significant. This suggests that high mental loads similarly impact mothers' and fathers' political interest; yet, mothers disproportionately bear the bulk of this load. Therefore, a greater share of mothers are impacted by these household dynamics.

Fourth, one concern might be that the findings are driven by single parents. Having a partner increases political engagement (e.g. [Verba, Burns, N. and Schlozman, 1997](#)), and is negatively correlated with mental load (see [section B](#) of the SM). I rerun all models showing significant effects with the subsample of mothers and fathers who have a partner. The findings are robust to this test ([SM Tables C9–C10](#)).<sup>13</sup>

Fifth and finally, my measure of the mental load uses primary responsibility for domestic cognitive labour. This approach is theoretically appropriate—tasks done mostly by one person are likely to feel more burdensome—and empirically sound, as social desirability bias might lead some respondents to over-report shared responsibilities. However, this method could undercount work that is truly shared between partners. To address this, I rerun the analysis using an alternative measure where mostly me is coded as 1, shared

equally as 0.5, and mostly partner and someone else as 0. This adjusted scale still ranges from 0 to 1, but the revised mental load averages are 80% for women and 59% for men. Including shared equally responses raises the mean by 8 points for women and 14 points for men. Notably, the same curvilinear patterns appear with this measure, except that high mental load is no longer significantly linked to interest in national issues among mothers or fathers (see [SM Tables C11–C12](#) for further details).

### Conclusion

Despite advances in women's access to education and employment, women continue to take on a second shift at home ([Hochschild and Machung, 2012](#)). This study offers a quantitative method to measure the cognitive aspect of this labour and explores its political consequences among parents. I find a large gender gap of 26 points among U.S. parents, about double the size of the gap in physical household labour. Previous time-use studies that include some cognitive household labour find smaller gender gaps, comparable to those in physical tasks ([Lee and Waite, 2005](#); [Offer and Schneider, 2011](#)). This is likely because estimating the *time* spent on ongoing, diffuse mental work is challenging. My task-based mental load scale supports qualitative findings that women bear most of this work ([Daminger, 2019](#)). Future studies can use this measure to explore other topics, such as how the mental load correlates with paid labour or leisure.

Examining how the mental load relates to political interest reveals a nuanced relationship. Low levels of cognitive household labour encourage political interest, possibly by enhancing skills, efficacy, and social ties. However, as the mental load increases, it crowds out energy and mental space for political engagement. Since fathers are more often at the low end of the mental load, it tends to positively affect them. Conversely, mothers, who bear more mental load, experience more negative impacts on political engagement, especially on general issues that seem distant from family life. The highest political interest appears at moderate levels of mental load. These findings suggest that redistributing the mental load more equally could enhance overall political engagement.

This study has several limitations. First, the data are cross-sectional and cannot assess household-level mental load (including agreement between partners) or changes in mental load over time and their impact on political interest. As quantitative measures of mental load are emerging, such longitudinal data are not yet available. Additionally, the study focuses on parents of dependent-age children, leaving the dynamics among non-parents or parents of older children

13 The exception is that the negative effect of high mental load on interest in national politics for mothers is significant at the 0.1 rather than 0.05 level.

under-explored. The sample also lacks several relevant variables, such as urban/rural status, state indicators, migration status, religion, family structure, working hours, parenting norms, and disability. Future research using panel studies, partner perspectives, and diverse samples with a broader range of covariates could deepen our understanding of the mental load and its political implications.

Second, while this study measures the cognitive dimension of household labour, the mental load also includes an emotional component (Dean, Churchill and Ruppner, 2022). Future research should investigate how to better capture this emotional aspect. As one indicator of wellbeing, the survey used here asks how satisfied respondents are with the division of mental labour in their household. While 66 percent of fathers report satisfaction, only 42 percent of mothers agree. Further research should examine how cognitive labour inequalities affect psychological well-being (Haupt and Gelbgiser, 2023; Petts and Carlson, 2023).

Finally, comparative studies are needed to understand how gender gaps in the mental load vary across countries, cultures of care, and welfare systems. As the U.S. represents an extreme case due to its lack of federally mandated parental support, findings may differ in contexts with more generous policies like shared parental leave and subsidized childcare. Evidence that paternity leave can increase fathers' household participation (Patnaik, 2019) and promote gender-egalitarian norms (Tavits et al., 2023) suggests such policies could reduce gender disparities.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at ESR online.

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## Data Availability

Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/QR51A8>

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