

# What Makes a Good Local Leader? Evidence from U.S. Mayors and City Managers

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## ABSTRACT

What are the traits of a good local leader? While most studies of local officials focus on the mayors of large cities, 85% of municipalities in the United States have a population of less than 20,000. We conduct in-depth phone interviews with nearly 300 mayors and city managers from predominantly small and mid-sized cities in the United States to learn about their backgrounds. We focus on two standard ability measures (education and prior occupation) and draw from research in public administration and economics to introduce two new dimensions of quality: public service motivation and managerial skill. We paint a comprehensive descriptive portrait of the respondents in our sample and the cities they represent, and we then examine whether these traits matter for the policy goals that local leaders choose to focus on during their time in office. These results offer a promising new approach for researchers studying political leadership and its consequences, both in the local context and beyond.

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## Introduction

A rich body of work in comparative politics and political economy focuses on political selection, or the process by which leaders with different traits assume office (Besley *et al.*, 2011; Besley and Reynal-Querol, 2011; Best, Cotta, *et al.*, 2000; Bhusal *et al.*, 2020; Carnes and Lupu, 2016b; Dal Bó and Finan, 2018; Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017; Galasso and Nannicini, 2011; Putnam *et al.*, 1976; Thompson *et al.*, 2019). But scholars have largely focused on the selection of national leaders, particularly in countries other than the United States, and we know little about the political selection process in the context of U.S. local governments. Our study fills this gap. Municipal governments profoundly affect the day-to-day life of residents, from ensuring access to clean drinking water, to organizing garbage collection, to investing in housing and public transportation. What does it mean for city leaders to be highly qualified for office? Do different types of cities tend to select “better” leaders, and does this matter for city governance?

To answer these questions, we conduct an original phone survey of U.S. mayors and city managers that allows us to learn about their background characteristics and leadership traits. We draw from literature on comparative politics, public administration, and economics to study four potential measures of leader quality. Two of these measures — educational attainment and prior occupational prestige — have often been used as proxies for quality (Dal Bó and Finan, 2018), in part because they are relatively easy to observe. However, these measures have both theoretical and empirical problems that we discuss in the next section. To overcome some of these issues, we introduce two new benchmarks that tap into the notion of quality: public service motivation and managerial skill. We define and discuss each of these measures and their theoretical rationales in the next section.

In the first half of this paper, we paint a detailed descriptive portrait of the respondents in our sample to understand how local leaders compare on both these old and new dimensions of ability across cities. For example, we find evidence that U.S. mayors and city managers are more well-educated and come from more prestigious occupations than the general U.S. public. We also find that managerial skill correlates strongly with years of education and occupational prestige, but public service motivation appears to be a distinct dimension of leadership.

Next, we examine which types of cities select leaders that score highly on these four attributes. Existing research demonstrates that societies vary in their ability to select politicians with desirable traits (e.g. Best, Cotta, *et al.*, 2000).

If larger or wealthier cities are more likely to select highly qualified leaders — or if those leaders are able to be more effective in those places — the political selection process might perpetuate or even exacerbate local inequality across communities. We find that more affluent cities with higher median home values and more educated residents are more likely to select mayors or managers with higher educational attainment and more prestigious occupational backgrounds. At the same time, larger cities tend to select leaders who score more highly in terms of managerial skill, and left-leaning cities are more likely to select leaders with higher levels of public service motivation.

We finally turn to the question of whether these four traits matter for how city leaders approach their time in office. Drawing from the transcripts of our interviews, we classify the policy goals of our respondents into eight broad categories developed by the Menino Survey of Mayors — a nationally representative study of U.S. mayors of cities with populations over 75,000 (Einstein *et al.*, 2018). We find that while both the leaders that we interviewed and the mayors in the Menino Survey prioritize the quality of life for their residents above other goals, the mayors and managers of the small and mid-sized cities in our sample are more likely to mention financial management and governance as being important considerations. We also find that public service motivation and managerial skill are strongly correlated with mentioning socioeconomic issues as a major goal for a leader's time in office, while occupational prestige is negatively associated with discussing socioeconomic issues. This correlation persists even after accounting for a rich array of city covariates that ensures we are comparing leaders from similar cities.

This paper makes three distinct contributions. First, most of what we know about the personal characteristics of local leaders comes from surveys of the mayors of only the largest cities (e.g. Einstein *et al.*, 2020, 2018; Kirkland, 2018; Mullin *et al.*, 2004; Murphy, 1980; Wolman *et al.*, 1990). And yet, most municipalities in the United States are relatively small, with 85% having a population under 20,000. We paint a rich descriptive portrait of the leadership traits of U.S. mayors and city managers drawing from a sample of cities of all sizes. Second, we bring together theoretical insights about the study of leadership and political selection from various research agendas that have not traditionally been in conversation with each other, including work on comparative politics, public administration, and urban political economy. Finally, we contribute to a growing literature in American politics that asks what it means for public officials to be effective (Miquel and Snyder Jr., 2006; Volden and Wiseman, 2014). This work typically focuses on state and national politicians and defines quality in terms of outputs, such as legislative productivity. We extend these efforts to the study of local politicians and draw from different research traditions to study several potential measures of leader quality that are both prior to and distinct from governing outcomes.

The present paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we draw from the existing literature to motivate our research questions and provide theoretical intuition for our measures of local leader quality. In Section 3, we introduce the data collected via an original survey. In Section 4, we provide a descriptive overview of the leaders in our sample and compare their education levels and occupations with both the public and politicians in other levels of office. In Section 5, we introduce our two new measures of ability: public service motivation and managerial skill. In Section 6, we examine the city-level correlates of leader quality. In Section 7, we examine whether the ability measures introduced in the previous sections correlate with the stated policy goals of city leaders. Section 8 concludes.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Candidate Quality and Political Selection**

When political scientists or economists refer to candidate quality, they generally have in mind the ability of politicians to do their jobs honestly and competently (e.g. Besley, 2005). However, to measure the idea of quality, researchers often rely on educational attainment and occupational background simply because these traits are relatively easy to observe and measure (Besley *et al.*, 2011; Besley and Reynal-Querol, 2011; Gottesman and Morey, 2006; Kotakorpi and Poutvaara, 2011). Theoretically, both tap into the idea of human capital, and education in particular is also associated with both civic virtue and democratic participation, which might be desirable traits in leaders. However, as Dal Bó *et al.* (2017) point out, these measures are also problematic because they are often simply a reflection of socioeconomic status or luck. Dal Bó *et al.* (2017) also find that education is only weakly correlated to cognitive abilities and leadership skills. Similarly, as Carnes and Lupu (2016b) observe, there is very little evidence that education matters for how politicians behave in office. Exploiting as-if random leadership transitions across a variety of contexts, Carnes and Lupu confirm that leaders with more education perform no better in terms of generating economic growth or winning reelection, among a host of other outcomes.

Nevertheless, given the large body of extant research on educational attainment and occupational prestige, we begin by examining how the leaders in our sample compare on these dimensions with both Members of Congress and the general public. We then draw from literature in public administration and economics to introduce two additional measures that tap into the notion of quality: public service motivation and managerial competence. Perry and Wise (1990) define public service motivation as an individual's "predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions" (368). A variety of research demonstrates that politicians and bureaucrats who are intrinsically motivated by career paths in the public sector perform at a

higher level and enjoy greater job satisfaction (Ashraf *et al.*, 2014; Gulzar and Khan, 2021; Moynihan and Pandey, 2007; Naff and Crum, 1999; Paarlberg and Lavigna, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2012). While the concept of public service motivation was originally meant to explain the behavior of civil servants, recent research has also increasingly applied this concept to local politicians (e.g. Dal Bó *et al.*, 2018), and Ritz (2015) finds that Swiss city council members who score highly on public service motivation are more likely to work longer hours and run for re-election. This trait also has the desirable quality of being less strongly correlated with socioeconomic class compared to education or career prestige.

One of the primary innovations of this paper is that we also develop an original battery of survey questions to assess managerial skill, or the extent to which local leaders use the management practices associated with successful organizational performance. Economists have long been interested in why some firms are more successful than others, and recent research has uncovered evidence that the decisions of managers matter a great deal for corporate survival, productivity, and profitability (Bertrand *et al.*, 2014; Bertrand and Schoar, 2003; Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007). In particular, the most successful firm leaders typically focus on setting clear goals, monitoring organizational performance, overseeing day-to-day operations, and appropriately incentivizing employees (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007; Di Liberto *et al.*, 2015; Rasul and Rogger, 2018; Rasul *et al.*, 2017). These practices should be similarly important for managing local governments. We adopt methodology developed by Bloom and Van Reenen (2007) and Carreri (Forthcoming) to assess the managerial effectiveness of city leaders, and we discuss this approach in detail in the next section.

After describing how the leaders in our sample compare along the four dimensions introduced above, we examine which city characteristics correlate with the emergence of different types of leaders. The theoretical expectations are unclear. On one hand, we might expect that voters or city council members in more educated, affluent cities would be more likely to select mayors or city managers with more education or more prestigious prior occupations. On the other hand, these cities might also provide more attractive outside options in the private sector compared to smaller, less affluent cities — and these options might be particularly lucrative for well-educated leaders with successful careers. In terms of public service motivation and managerial skill, we hypothesize that these traits are less likely to correlate with city characteristics, given that they are more difficult to observe. Public service motivation in particular might be a trait universally held by local leaders, in which case we should not observe differences in the types of cities where publicly motivated leaders emerge.

Finally, we ask whether these ability measures matter for the way in which local leaders approach their task of governing. In general, findings on whether local leaders influence policy outcomes in the United States are largely mixed.

Some research finds that mayoral partisanship shapes certain types of fiscal policy (De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Einstein and Kogan, 2016; Gerber and Hopkins, 2011), as does having a background in business (Kirkland, Forthcoming; Szakonyi, 2021). Other work finds no difference in the policy priorities of mayors of different races or genders (Ferreira and Gyourko, 2014; Hopkins and McCabe, 2012; Pelissero *et al.*, 2000), and Berry and Fowler (2021) uncover little evidence that individual mayors matter for local employment, income levels, and crime rates. However, Carreri and Payson (2020) demonstrate that city leaders who score highly on managerial competence tend to shift spending away from redistributive programs and toward developmental goals, which generates local economic growth via increased housing values and revenue generated from property taxes.

To assess whether and how the four measures of quality studied in this paper correlate with leader attitudes and choices in the local context, we focus on the stated policy goals of the respondents in our survey. At the beginning of each interview, we asked respondents to tell us about some of the major issues facing their cities and the goals that they had for their time in office. We later used recordings of the interviews to classify the responses into eight major policy areas: financial management, economic development, education, governance, socioeconomic issues, infrastructure, quality of life, and relationships. These categories were established by Einstein *et al.* (2014) in their inaugural Menino Survey of Mayors — one of the first and most important surveys of mayors in the United States.

In their study, Einstein *et al.* (2014) asked a series of open-ended questions about the challenges and policy priorities facing the respondents in their sample. They then hand-coded the responses and classified them into the eight categories listed above. For example, discussions of budgeting and funding fall under the financial management category, while racial inequality and housing affordability fall under socioeconomic issues. We describe each of the categories in further detail when we introduce the data. We begin by comparing the goals of the leaders in our sample — who are drawn primarily from small and mid-sized cities — with the goals of the mayors in the Menino Survey, who govern cities with populations over 75,000.

We then examine whether the four ability measures that we introduce in our study correlate with leader policy priorities. This exploratory analysis reveals several interesting patterns. After adjusting for each of the other traits, we find a positive correlation between the public service motivation and managerial skill of local leaders and the likelihood that they mention a policy goal related to socioeconomic issues. At the same time, we find a negative correlation between occupational prestige and mentioning socioeconomic goals. These results hold even when comparing the leaders of cities with similar demographic and economic profiles. While we are unable to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between leader backgrounds and their policy priorities, it is

our hope that the patterns uncovered in this paper will serve as a starting point for researchers interested in studying the effects of local leader characteristics on their attitudes and governing choices while in office.

## **Data Collection and Survey**

For this study, we contacted a random sample of cities above 5,000 residents (as measured by the 2012 census) in California, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Washington, Florida, New York, and Indiana. We picked 5,000 residents as our population threshold because below this size the responsibilities and scope of municipal government fall dramatically, and we selected these nine states to maximize the number of municipalities, geographic diversity, and variation in form of government. The two primary forms of municipal government in the United States are mayor-council systems, where a mayor is elected separately from the council and maintains substantial executive power, and council-manager systems, where the city council appoints a professional city manager to oversee the budgeting and administrative process. In mayor-council systems we interview the mayor, while in council-manager systems we interview the city manager. Each of these positions roughly parallels the idea of a local executive leader, and including both types of respondents allows us to broadly generalize our results across the two most common forms of municipal government.

In total, the mayors and managers of 283 cities out of the 890 we contacted agreed to take part in our study. Our overall response rate was 32%, and additional details on recruitment and survey design can be found in Carreri and Payson (2020). To determine how representative the cities in our sample are, we compare the demographic characteristics of cities that agreed to participate in our study to those that declined, as well as to all other cities in the state. These balance tests are shown in Table A2 in the on-line Appendix. The cities in our sample are similar in terms of size and unemployment rates compared to other cities. However, they are also wealthier — with marginally higher incomes and higher housing values — and more likely to have residents with a college degree. While the differences between the cities in our sample and the rest of the cities in each state are substantively fairly small, they should be kept in mind when generalizing the following results.

In the survey, interviewers asked a variety of questions about the personal and leadership traits of the mayor or manager. These include the four characteristics discussed in the previous section — educational attainment, occupational background, public service motivation, and managerial effectiveness — and information about respondent age, gender, years of experience in their position, and ideological leaning. We discuss the survey methodology in detail in the Appendix, including recruitment methods, response scoring, and how a double-blind survey technique helps to alleviate concerns of interviewer and interviewee bias.

## Descriptive Evidence on Local Political Selection

We begin by examining how the leaders in our sample compare both with the public and to Members of Congress in terms of the two classic proxies for quality often employed in the political selection literature: occupational prestige and educational background. We calculate occupational prestige scores by classifying the prior occupation of the respondents into categories established by the U.S. Census and using the prestige scores for each category developed by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) (Smith and Son, 2014). Scores range from a low of 19 for a street corner drug dealer to a high of 77 for a surgeon.

Standard models of political selection predict *adverse selection* in terms of occupational background among public sector employees. In other words, the most talented individuals with more lucrative careers and higher incomes are assumed to face greater costs if they choose to enter the public sphere (Besley, 2005). However, recent empirical work consistently documents *positive selection* across various political offices, meaning that elected officials typically score more highly on ability measures relative to the general population (Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017; Thompson *et al.*, 2019).

In line with this more recent research, we find that both mayors and city managers come from previous occupations that have higher prestige scores than the general public (Figure 1). Among mayors, the most commonly represented

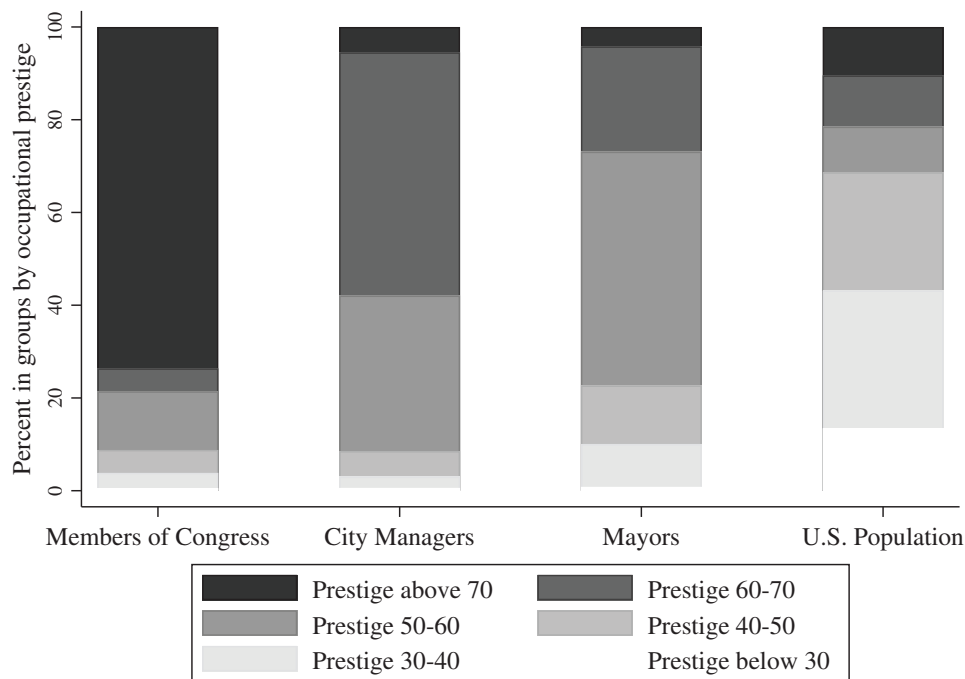


Figure 1: Selection as measured by occupational prestige.



occupational categories were business people, general and operations managers, lawyers, and marketing and sales managers, each of which have a score of 50 or above. City managers also come from prior occupations with high prestige scores, although this result is a bit mechanical because most of the respondents in our sample came from other careers in city management, i.e. assistant city managers or serving as the city manager in another city — both of which have scores over 60. However, among the city managers who had other occupations before pursuing their public career, these professions also rated fairly highly in terms of prestige, including administrative services managers (60), urban planners (55), and social and community service managers (52). On the other hand, Members of Congress are significantly more likely to come from occupations with a prestige score of 70 or above, reflecting the high number of former or current chief executive officers. This provides suggestive evidence that the returns to office at the Congressional level are high enough to lure CEOs away from the private sector positions, while this does not appear to happen as frequently at the local level.

We also find that both mayors and city managers are more likely than the general public to have a four-year college or advanced degree (Figure 2). However, managers are significantly more likely than mayors to have an advanced degree, likely reflecting the fact that city management jobs generally require a master’s degree in public administration or city planning. In fact, city managers are even more likely than Members of Congress to have an advanced

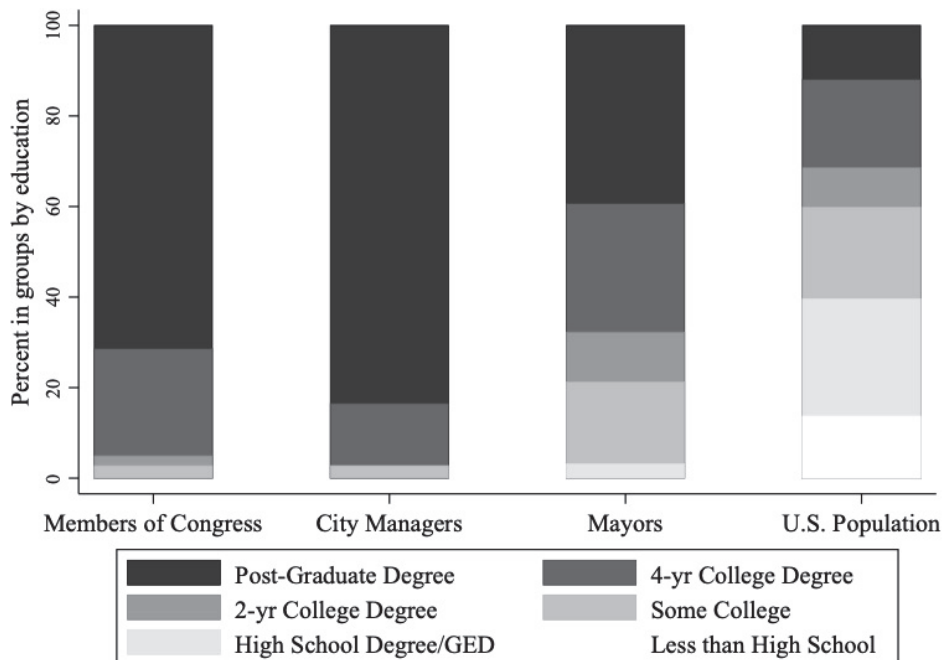


Figure 2: Selection as measured by education.

degree. Research has already clearly established that Members of Congress are, on average, more highly educated and from more prestigious previous occupations than the general public, which are traits correlated with having an elite background (e.g. Carnes, 2012; Carnes and Lupu, 2016a; Eggers and Klačnja, 2021). However, we show that these descriptive differences between politicians and voters emerge early in the political career pipeline and are present among city leaders across communities of all sizes. If the goal of our local political pipeline is to produce representatives that are well-educated and from prestigious careers, the system appears to be working fairly well.

### **Expanding Measures of Quality: Public Service Motivation and Managerial Skill**

When political scientists or economists study candidate quality, they often use educational background and occupational prestige as proxies simply because these traits are relatively easy to observe and measure. However, there is a growing recognition that education and prior occupation may simply reflect social class (Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017) and that these qualities do not seem to matter much for governing outcomes (Carnes and Lupu, 2016b). In a 2018 review piece, Dal Bó and Finan (2018) call for scholars to move beyond these standard proxies in research on political selection. In our survey, we ask a series of questions that allow us to capture two additional measures of leader “quality”: public service motivation and managerial competence.

To measure public service motivation, We ask the standard abridged battery of questions comprising the Perry Index (Coursey and Pandey, 2007), which are designed to identify the extent to which public officials are motivated by career paths in the public sector as opposed to pursuing potentially more lucrative careers in the private sector. While the majority of existing research on this concept has focused on bureaucrats and civil service employees (e.g. Naff and Crum, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990), several recent papers have demonstrated that public service motivation can predict behavior of local elected politicians as well (Dal Bó *et al.*, 2018; Ritz, 2015; Ritz *et al.*, 2016) — although these studies tend to focus on countries other than the U.S. Respondents are asked how much they agree or disagree on a 5-point scale with statements like, “I don’t care much for politicians,” “I consider public service my civic duty,” and “I would prefer seeing public officials do what is best for the whole community even if it harmed my interests.” There are 10 questions in total, and the final public sector motivation score is the unweighted average across each item. The scale ranges from a low of 1 to a high of 5 (with higher scores indicating greater public service orientation), and the entire battery of questions can be found in the Appendix.

We also ask a series of original questions designed to capture the extent to which local leaders use the management practices associated with successful organizational performance. The survey methodology is inspired by Bloom and Van Reenen’s (2007) study of management approaches in firms, which has been applied to the context of local governments by Carreri (Forthcoming) and Carreri and Payson (2020) and has also been successfully used to evaluate the managerial performance of bureaucrats (Rasul and Rogger, 2018; Rasul *et al.*, 2017) and school principals (Bloom *et al.*, 2015; Di Liberto *et al.*, 2015). The survey focuses on a set of four practices in the management of firms: target setting, performance monitoring, operations, and incentives. This set of practices should be similarly important for effectively managing local government: a good local leader needs to clearly set her goals, monitor the performance of the government in attaining these objectives, be knowledgeable of the daily operations of the government, and successfully administer the bureaucracy.

The survey consisted of a total of seven questions that are each scored in real time on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), and the overall managerial score is the unweighted average of the individual questions. By way of example, Figure 3 shows the first survey question with its associated scoring grid and three anonymized examples of answers that respectively earned a score of one, three, and five. We adopt the methodology used in Carreri (Forthcoming)

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<b>(1) Target Inter-Connection</b>			
	a) We would like to start by learning what you think are some of the main issues currently facing your city.		
	b) What types of goals or objectives have you set for your city and what are the practical targets related to these goals?		
	c) How are these goals assigned or delegated down to the individual members of the government and staff?		
	<b>Score 1</b>	<b>Score 3</b>	<b>Score 5</b>
<b>Scoring Grid</b>	Objectives and targets are very loosely defined without specific targets associated with them; goals are not communicated and/or delegated to other members of the staff	Objectives are well-defined with related targets; there is some communication and/or delegation but only to certain staff or departments	Objectives are very clearly defined with specific related targets; targets are clearly and widely communicated and/or delegated to many different departments or members of staff
<b>Anonymized examples</b>	Defines the objective as “homelessness”. Does not identify practical targets	Defines the objective as “Addressing homelessness”. Identifies one practical target (establishment of homeless navigation center). Assigns responsibilities to department leaders	Defines the objective as “Creating meaningful work for the homeless”. Identifies two practical targets (teaching financial literacy, placing into entry-level work) with specific goals for numbers reached. Assigns responsibilities through one-on-one and collective weekly meetings with department leaders who delegate to staff.

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Figure 3: Example of survey question, scoring grid, and anonymized answers.

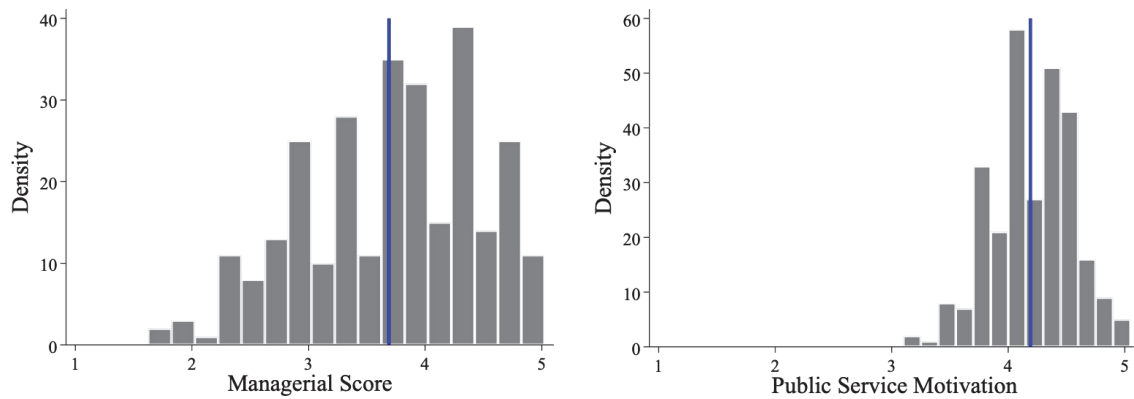


Figure 4: Distribution of the management score and public sector motivation.

*Notes:* The plots above represent the distribution of the managerial score and Perry Public Service Index. The vertical line marks the mean.

and Carreri and Payson (2020), and we describe the scoring methodology in greater detail and provide the full text of the survey in the Appendix.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of both the Perry Index and the managerial scores. The managerial competence scores range from a low of 1.625 to a high of 5 and display substantial variation. The average score was 3.68, with a standard deviation just under 1. As an initial validity check, we compare the managerial scores of mayors and city managers. Unsurprisingly, city managers tend to receive higher average scores than mayors, reflecting the fact that they have generally received professional training in municipal management. The Perry Index also had a possible range from 1 to 5 (with higher scores indicating greater intrinsic public service motivation), and the average was 4.2. In other words, the leaders in our sample scored quite highly in terms of their commitment to public service. As we predicted, the variation in the Perry Public Service Index was also lower than for other measures, with a standard deviation of 0.38. Both mayors and city managers appear to be highly and uniformly motivated by careers in public service.

In Table 1, we show the correlations from bivariate regressions of our four measures of leader quality. Occupational prestige, education, and our managerial score are all positively and significantly correlated with each other. As predicted, the Perry Public Service Index is not strongly correlated with any of the other three traits. In particular, public service motivation appears to be almost completely orthogonal to occupational prestige. Given that the Perry Index is designed to capture motivation to pursue work outside the private sector, it makes sense that coming from a higher-earning professional background does not predict public service orientation.

We also examine whether these four measures correlate with ideology. While the vast majority of cities in our sample have non-partisan elections,

Table 1: Measures of “quality” — Correlations from bivariate regressions.

	Education (years)	Public sector motivation	Occupational prestige
Managerial score	1.104* (0.192)	0.029 (0.029)	2.689* (0.856)
Occupational prestige	0.036* (0.014)	-0.002 (0.002)	
Public sector motivation	-0.252 (0.416)		

Note: \* is significant at the 5% level.

Table 2: Correlation between “quality” and ideology.

	(1) Education (years)	(2) Public sector motivation	(3) Occupational prestige score	(4) Managerial score
Ideology - Left	1.131* (0.350)	0.184* (0.050)	1.792 (1.527)	0.207 <sup>†</sup> (0.106)
Ideology - Center	0.770* (0.359)	0.109* (0.051)	0.464 (1.568)	0.156 (0.109)
Observations	266	266	259	266

Notes: The excluded category is *Ideology - Right*. <sup>†</sup> is significant at the 10% level; \* is significant at the 5% level.

we asked about the ideological leanings of the respondents using the standard 5-point ideology scale. Given the relatively small sample size, we collapse left and center-left responses into one category (“left”) and right and center-right responses into one category (“right”). The correlations from bivariate regressions are shown in Table 2. Relative to right-leaning politicians (the omitted category), left-leaning and centrist politicians tend to be better educated and have higher public sector motivation and managerial scores. They also tend to come from more prestigious previous occupations, although this correlation is noisier.

Finally, because our managerial score represents a relatively new way to conceptualize local leader quality, we also perform an additional test to demonstrate the validity of this measure. We compare the managerial competence score with the residual from a Mincer earnings regression, an increasingly

popular approach to approximate the ability or competence of politicians in the political economy literature.<sup>1</sup> The residual from a Mincer earnings regression is used as a measure of ability because it captures the difference in earnings among individuals with similar characteristics — i.e. the variation in earnings not explained by traits like individual education or age. To perform this analysis, we hand collected data on the public salaries of the leaders in our sample from a variety of sources for the most recent full year during which they were in office.<sup>2</sup>

Following Besley *et al.* (2017), we estimate the regression

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Salary}_i &= f(\text{Educ}_i, \text{Age}_i, \text{Experience}_i) + \beta \text{Female}_i + \gamma \text{Manager}_i \\ &+ \delta \text{Population}_i + \varepsilon_i, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where  $\text{Salary}_i$  is the yearly salary earned by leader  $i$  as mayor or city manager.  $\text{Educ}$  is a categorical variable recording  $i$ 's highest educational attainment (less than college, college, or more than college), and  $\text{Age}$  represents indicators for each age quintile.  $\text{Experience}$  represents indicators for quintiles of years of experience in local government,  $\text{Female}$  is an indicator taking value one for women, and  $\text{Manager}$  is an indicator for city managers. Finally,  $\text{Population}$  is the population size of the city where leader  $i$  holds office.

Function  $f$  represents the fact that we control flexibly for education, age, and years of local government experience by including an indicator for every group defined by age and education, as well as their possible double and triple interactions. This accounts, for instance, for the fact that salaries might “reward” a postgraduate education differently at different points along a leader’s life-cycle. We then calculate the correlation between the Mincer earnings residual and our managerial score, as well as the Perry Index for comparison.

We find that a one standard deviation increase in the Mincer earnings residual is associated with a statistically significant increase in the managerial score of 0.11 points, shown in Table 3.<sup>3</sup> These result suggests that our managerial score is capturing some measure of quality above and beyond what can be measured by easily observable attributes like education. Interestingly, the Perry Index does not correlate with the wage-residual measure of ability. This might be explained by the fact that local officials that score highly on this dimension are not particularly driven by high wages but rather by intrinsic motivation to serve the public.

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<sup>1</sup>See Besley *et al.* (2017), Bhusal *et al.* (2020), and Dal Bó *et al.* (2017, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>Data available from seethroughny.net, transparentcalifornia.com, and govsalaries.com

<sup>3</sup>Results to calculate the Mincer residual are available in on-line replication code.

Table 3: Managerial score and wage-residual measure of ability.

	(1) Managerial score	(2) Public sector motivation
Mincer residual (standard deviation units)	0.118* (0.045)	0.007 (0.023)
Observations	248	246
R-squared	0.031	0.000
Mean DV	3.701	4.192
SD DV	0.712	0.350

Note: \* is significant at the 5% level.

### Where Do High-Quality Leaders Emerge?

Having introduced four possible measures of leader quality, we now examine the city-level characteristics that correlate with each of the four traits. Figures 5 and 6 report coefficients from bivariate regressions of each of our four measures of leader quality on a series of city characteristics with state fixed effects. We find that cities with higher incomes, higher median home values, and more residents with college degrees are more likely to select leaders with more years of schooling and with higher occupational prestige scores (Figure 5).

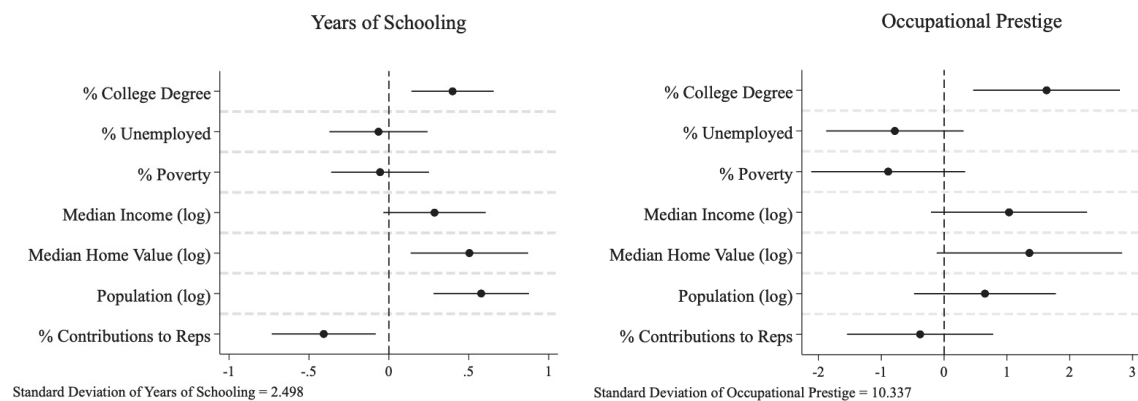


Figure 5: City correlates of educational attainment and occupational prestige.

Notes: Shows the correlations from OLS regressions between city covariates and leader education (in years of schooling) or occupational prestige (on a 0–100 scale) in the five years leading up to the election/appointment of the mayor or manager. Covariates are standardized, and the standard deviation of the dependent variable is reported at the bottom of the plot. Each regression includes state fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the city level.

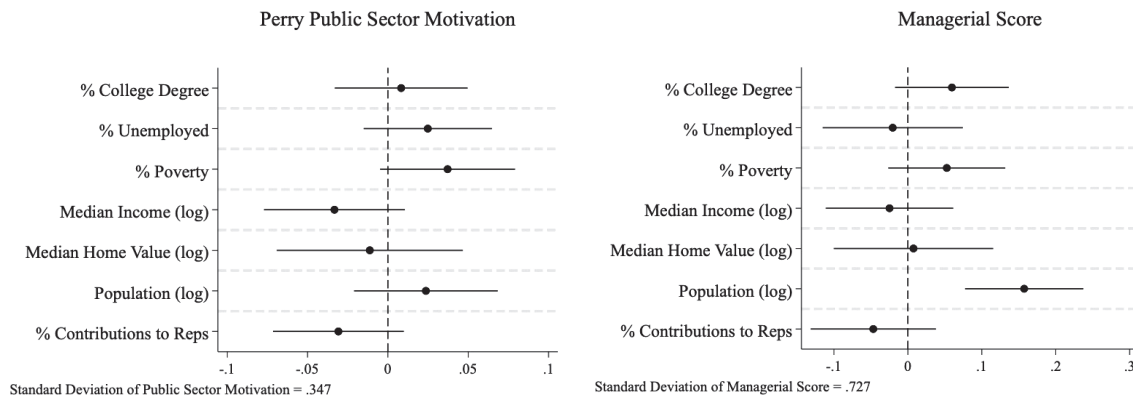


Figure 6: City correlates of leader public service motivation and managerial skill.

*Notes:* Shows the correlations from OLS regressions between city covariates and leader public service motivation or managerial skill in the five years leading up to the election/appointment of the mayor or manager. Covariates are standardized, and the standard deviation of the dependent variable is reported at the bottom of the plot. Each regression includes state fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the city level.

Well-educated leaders are also particularly likely to emerge in bigger cities with larger populations. Finally, we aggregated data on political contributions from Bonica (2019) to the city level to generate a variable capturing the share of individual contributors donating to Republicans. As the share of Republican donors increases, cities become more likely to select leaders with fewer years of schooling.

While the finding that wealthier places tend to select leaders with higher education levels and more prestigious prior occupations might be somewhat intuitive, it was not clear *ex-ante*. For example, while voters or city council members in more educated, affluent communities might be particularly likely to select leaders on the basis of education or occupational prestige, it might also be the case that these cities provide particularly attractive outside options in the private sector to the same leaders who score highly on these traits. But it appears that well-educated mayors and city managers from respected careers are willing to enter the public sector in these types of communities.

A different story emerges when we look at the relationship between city characteristics and both the Perry Public Service Index and our managerial score. There are no significant correlations with the Perry Index and any of the city characteristics reported in the coefficient plot (Figure 6). Again, this further suggests that public service motivation is a fairly universal trait among public officials across different types of cities, regardless of socioeconomic status. Note, however, the suggestive negative correlation between the share of political contributions going to Republicans and the Perry Index, suggesting that public service oriented leaders are more likely to emerge in more left-leaning places.



The only significant correlation between city characteristics and our measure of managerial competence is city population (Figure 6). Leaders who use effective management practices are just as likely to emerge in high versus low-socioeconomic status cities, and if anything, there is a modest, negative correlation between median income and the managerial score. It makes sense that more effective managers might tend to emerge in larger cities, given the greater complexity of overseeing municipal governments with more departments and responsibilities. However, it is generally more difficult to predict where leaders with high public motivation or managerial competence will emerge relative to leaders with more years of schooling and higher professional prestige. Note also that the  $x$ -axes of Figure 6 are much smaller than in Figure 5, suggesting smaller correlations overall. While education and prior occupation are likely fairly visible to voters, which allows residents of particular cities to select more well-educated leaders with more prestigious professional backgrounds, it is more difficult to observe or predict whether a leader is motivated by public service or will be an effective manager. As a result, public service-oriented leaders that use effective management practices are equally likely to emerge in cities of different types (after accounting for population).

### **Do Leaders with Different Traits Have Different Policy Goals?**

In order to understand whether the leadership traits described in the previous sections matter for city outcomes, we focus on the stated policy goals that leaders articulated in their interviews. The first two questions of the interview always asked mayors and managers about the major issues facing their city and their goals for their time in office (full text of the questions are in Section A.1 in the Appendix). After each interview was conducted, a research assistant listened to the recordings and classified these goals according to eight broad policy areas established by the Menino Survey of Mayors.<sup>4</sup> *Financial Management* goals relate to budgeting, financial health, federal and state funding, and generating revenue. *Economic Development* goals focus on attracting development and managing growth. *Education* goals deal with city schools and vocational training. *Governance* goals relate broadly to labor, leadership, and technology. *Socioeconomic Issues* include goals relating to poverty, housing affordability, and racial and income inequality. *Infrastructure* goals deal with city operations and transportation. *Quality of Life* goals relate to crime, planning and sustainability, neighborhood character, and healthy living. Finally, *Relationship* goals emphasize city relationships with other local, state, and federal officials.

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<sup>4</sup>Several respondents did not consent to being recorded, while other recordings had technical problems. After accounting for these issues, we were left with transcripts from 216 interviews.

Table 4: Summary of major local policy priorities.

Policy area	Specific goals/examples
Financial management	Achieving a balanced budget Cutting costs Fiscal sustainability Addressing deficits Generating revenue through new taxes
Economic development	Public private partnerships Retail recruitment Revitalizing commercial sector Attracting business Managing traffic and congestion
Education	Working with school district to build new high school Promoting higher education attainment
Governance	Police, fire, and municipal staffing Strategic planning Promoting technology use by council
Socioeconomic issues	Poverty and homelessness Housing affordability Racial disparities and inequality
Infrastructure	Transportation Building new facilities Water and sewerage projects Updating/maintaining aging infrastructure
Quality of Life	Community safety and reducing crime Addressing public health issues Parks and recreation Green planning
Relationships	Partnering with neighboring cities on housing issues Addressing transportation issues with state agencies

Table 4 shows some of the specific examples of goals that were mentioned within each broad policy area. Goals could be classified under more than one area. For example, one city manager in California said that one of his goals was to “Make the government budgeting process more transparent and efficient in order to support growth and do our best to attract businesses to come to town.” This goal speaks to both *Financial Management* and *Economic Development*. A mayor in New York State discussed the city’s equity agenda, explaining “As we talk about equity and what that means as a city...it’s being able to use data to measure progress. We measure, for example, our own hiring...not just what is the ethnic and racial makeup of our workforce but what is the racial and ethnic makeup of our payroll?” This priority was classified as addressing both *Socioeconomic Issues* and *Governance*. Several

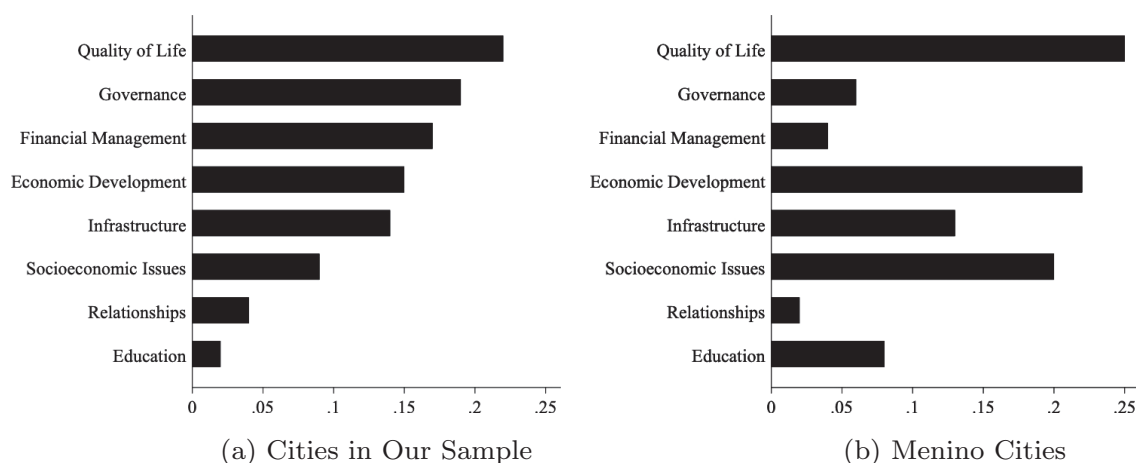


Figure 7: Goals of our leaders versus Menino Survey mayors.

*Notes:* Figure (a) shows the share of goals mentioned within each category, while Figure (b) shows the proportion of mayors listing each category as one of their top two most important priorities. Data from the Menino Cities come from the 2016 Menino Survey of Mayors Final Report (<http://www.bu.edu/ioc/2016-menino-survey-of-mayors/>). Note that Menino respondents were limited to listing two policy goals, while respondents in our sample could list as many as they wanted.

additional quotes with their associated policy classifications can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 7 shows the relative importance of the policy goals of the leaders in our sample compared to the goals of the respondents in the 2016 Menino Survey, which was the last year for which the question about policy goals was asked. Recall that the Menino Survey targets mayors of cities with populations over 75,000, and the average city size in the 2016 study was over 260,000 residents. In contrast, our interviewed leaders represent much smaller municipalities, with the average population being 45,000 among cities in our sample.

There are a few important things to note when comparing the responses in Figure 7(a) and Figure 7(b). The Menino Survey asked respondents to list their top two “policy challenges,” whereas we asked an open-ended question about the “issues and goals” facing the leader’s city and did not limit the number of responses. On average, the mayors and managers in our sample discussed between 2 and 3 challenges or goals, although some respondents discussed up to 6. As a result, Figure 7(a) shows the share of goals mentioned within each category, while Figure 7(b) shows the proportion of mayors listing each category as one of their top two most important priorities. While these differences should be kept in mind when interpreting the results, some intriguing initial patterns emerge.

For example, the leaders from both our study and the Menino Survey mention Quality of Life goals more frequently than any other issue. However, while economic development is the second most widely stated goal in the Menino Survey, in our survey it falls to the fourth most discussed priority.

While classic growth machine models of urban politics claim that city leaders are often constrained to pursue economic development and growth at all costs (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Molotch, 1976; Peterson, 1981), it appears that smaller city leaders are less universally motivated by this goal. Big city mayors are also much more likely to mention socioeconomic goals than the leaders in our sample — likely because the cities represented in the Menino Survey tend to be more racially and socioeconomically diverse. Note that very few leaders mention education as a primary goal in our sample. This makes sense, given that the vast majority of public schools in all but the largest cities are governed by elected school boards rather than by mayors.

Next, we examine whether our four measures of leader quality correlate with the stated policy goals of respondents. In Panel A of Table 5, we show simple correlations from OLS regressions between the number of goals mentioned by the interviewed leader in each category and the four leader traits. For example, when two leaders look similar in terms of education and prior occupation, what is the marginal correlation between their public service motivation and discussing a specific policy issue? We also adjust for the total number of goals mentioned in case higher quality leaders are more likely to simply list more goals. To save space, we omit results for education-related goals, which as we showed in Figure 7 comprise by far the smallest share of policy goals mentioned and which had correlations of virtually zero with each trait.

In general, there are strikingly few correlations between the four ability measures and the policy goals of the leader. One exception, however, is socioeconomic issues. Mayors and managers who score highly both in terms of their managerial competence and also in terms of their public service motivation are more likely to mention goals related to socioeconomic equality, with the most commonly mentioned priorities revolving around affordable housing, homelessness, and racial tensions. For example, one city manager in Ohio told us, “Our goals in terms of social equity are enhancing our relationships with non-profits throughout the city to do a better job raising awareness of racial disparities and equity in service provision.” Another mayor from Minnesota described efforts to build transitional homes, affordable housing, and assisted living facilities.

However, mayors and managers are likely constrained by the types of issues they are dealing with based on the specific circumstances of the cities they represent. To account for the fact that cities with particular challenges might be more likely to select leaders who score highly (or less highly) on these dimensions, in Panel B we also adjust for a variety of city-level characteristics measured in the five years before our interviewees took office. These controls include city population, median income, % white, % in poverty, % unemployed, and % college educated. After restricting our comparisons to cities with similar demographic and economic compositions, we still find a positive relationship between both public service motivation and the managerial score in terms of the

Table 5: Leader traits and leader priorities/goals.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Financial management	Economic development	Governance	Socio economic	Infrastructure	Quality of life	Intergov relationships
<i>Panel A: No city controls</i>							
Public sector motivation	0.027 (0.114)	0.042 (0.096)	-0.111 (0.114)	0.150 <sup>†</sup> (0.085)	-0.147 (0.099)	0.099 (0.114)	-0.010 (0.068)
Managerial score	-0.095 (0.063)	-0.029 (0.053)	0.040 (0.063)	0.143* (0.047)	0.064 (0.055)	-0.076 (0.063)	-0.056 (0.037)
Education	0.009 (0.018)	-0.012 (0.015)	0.005 (0.018)	0.015 (0.013)	-0.017 (0.015)	0.002 (0.018)	0.001 (0.011)
Occupational prestige	0.003 (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)	0.003 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.000 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)	-0.006* (0.002)
<i>Panel B: With city controls</i>							
Public sector motivation	-0.001 (0.117)	0.068 (0.098)	-0.093 (0.116)	0.124 (0.086)	-0.138 (0.102)	0.106 (0.116)	-0.010 (0.069)
Managerial score	-0.134* (0.066)	-0.013 (0.055)	0.059 (0.065)	0.115* (0.048)	0.055 (0.057)	-0.067 (0.065)	-0.037 (0.039)
Education	0.001 (0.018)	-0.010 (0.015)	0.009 (0.018)	0.010 (0.013)	-0.018 (0.016)	0.004 (0.018)	0.004 (0.011)
Occupational prestige	0.003 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)	-0.006 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)	-0.001 (0.004)	0.004 (0.004)	-0.005 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Observations	216	216	216	216	216	216	216
R-squared	0.202	0.064	0.218	0.140	0.095	0.273	0.113
Mean DV	0.426	0.380	0.481	0.227	0.347	0.551	0.0972

Notes: All specifications include a control for the number of goals mentioned by each leader. City controls in *Panel B* include median income, % white, % in poverty, % unemployed, % college educated and fixed effects for population quintiles in the period before the leader took office. The mean of the dependent variables are reported at the bottom of the table. <sup>†</sup> is significant at the 10% level; \* is significant at the 5% level.

likelihood of mentioning a policy goal related to socioeconomic issues (although the correlation is less precisely estimated for public service motivation).

To account for the fact that both the managerial score and the Perry Index are comprised of component questions, we also calculate inverse covariance weighted scores for each of these measures. This approach helps to ensure that no single question about public service motivation or management practices is dominating the overall index. The results remain unchanged when we do this, and the inverse covariance weighted Perry Index and managerial score continue to correlate with mentions of socioeconomic goals (Table A4 in the Appendix).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, these correlations are simply suggestive and interesting descriptive facts about the policy goals of the leaders in our sample. Even after comparing officials from similar cities, it is difficult to know whether the greater emphasis placed on socioeconomic issues by leaders with higher managerial scores and public service motivation reflects a real difference in preferences across leaders, or if certain types of cities are more likely to select these leaders in the first place. Note, however, that the correlations between policy mentions and the managerial score and Perry Index are much larger, on average, than those with education or occupational prestige. Neither of these two standard ability measures offers much in the way of understanding which city leaders choose to pursue certain types of policy goals.

## Discussion

What are the traits of a good local leader? We examine how mayors and managers in cities of all sizes across the United States rank on four possible dimensions of quality: educational attainment, occupational prestige, public service motivation, and managerial competence. While education and occupational background have been two of the most commonly used ability measures in the context of comparative political selection, public service motivation is a concept more commonly invoked in public administration research. We also draw from literature in economics to develop an original survey that allows us to assess the managerial skill of the local leaders in our sample — a leadership trait that has not been widely studied by political scientists.

We find that education, previous occupation, and managerial effectiveness are all positively correlated, but that the Perry Public Service Index appears to tap into a different dimension of leadership. We also find substantial evidence of positive political selection across the leaders in our sample — that is, they

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<sup>5</sup>Note that if we were engaging in formal hypothesis testing, we would also need to adjust the standard errors to adjust for multiple comparisons. However, the goal here is simply exploratory analysis to reveal the presence and strength of correlations. The standard errors should thus be interpreted as placing bounds around the precision of the correlation.

tend to score more highly on measures of ability than the general public. While more affluent communities tend to select local leaders that are well-educated and come from prestigious occupations, the less visible traits of public service motivation and managerial effectiveness correlate with city-level characteristics to a lesser degree.

We also find several suggestive differences in the stated policy goals of the leaders in our sample relative to the priorities of the mayors of larger cities. While preliminary, these results suggest that studies of local politics may mask important heterogeneity in the goals and preferences of local politicians if they focus only on the largest cities. Finally, we also find a correlation in our two new measures of quality and the likelihood of discussing policy goals related to socioeconomic issues. Understanding why certain public officials choose to pursue platforms related to social justice and socioeconomic inequality is an important and understudied question that deserves further attention in future research.

Overall, our results offer a detailed descriptive portrait of political selection in small and mid-sized cities in the United States. While the leaders in our sample are well-educated and come from prestigious careers, on average, we expand beyond these two traditional proxies of quality to offer researchers two promising new measures, including our original managerial competence score. Together, the findings in this paper suggest that in order to understand the policy goals of local leaders, scholars of U.S. urban political economy need to move beyond studying the largest cities and continue to explore new dimensions and measures of candidate quality.

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