

ARTICLE

Evaluating (in)experience in congressional elections

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Abstract

From the 1980s to the mid-2010s, nearly three-quarters of members newly elected to the US House of Representatives had previous elected experience; however, only half of the freshmen elected from 2016 to 2020 held prior office. In this article, we investigate emergence- and success-driven explanations for the declining proportion of experienced officeholders entering Congress. In our analyses, we find that the advantages traditionally afforded to experienced candidates are waning. First, we show that inexperienced candidates' emergence patterns have changed; amateurs are increasingly apt to emerge in the same kinds of contests as their experienced counterparts. We then show that experienced candidates have lost their fundraising edge and that—for certain kinds of candidates—the value of elected experience itself has declined. Lastly, we identify other candidate characteristics as strong predictors for success in modern elections. We demonstrate that these electorally advantageous identities overwhelmingly belong to candidates who lack elected experience.

What qualities and characteristics make for a successful congressional candidate? A bevy of political science literature points to incumbency as the principal predictor for success in US elections (e.g., Erikson, 1971; Jacobson, 2015; Mayhew, 2004); incumbent reelection rates to Congress have regularly exceeded 90% for decades. Among nonincumbents, candidates with a history of holding publicly elected office—whom we refer to as “experienced” candidates—have been shown to be especially successful at winning seats in Congress (e.g., Jacobson, 1989, 2015). Extant work finds that experienced candidates see greater success in elections because they enjoy some of the same direct and indirect benefits that contribute to the incumbency advantage (Carson et al., 2007). In particular, experienced candidates enjoy the direct benefit of a public service reputation (e.g., Mondak, 1995; Portmann, 2022) and indirect benefits associated with having run a prior successful campaign (e.g., Herrnson, 1992; Hirano & Snyder, 2019). Prior elected experience has, therefore, become the standard *ex ante* indicator for candidate viability or “quality” in

congressional elections research (e.g., Bonica, 2020; Lazarus, 2008; Thomsen, 2014).

Recent high-profile electoral victories among amateur politicians—like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in 2018 and Madison Cawthorn in 2020—call into question whether long-held theories about the relationship between experience and success still hold true. Do experienced candidates still possess an electoral edge over their amateur counterparts in modern congressional elections? To investigate this question, we systematically compiled data on the political backgrounds, personal characteristics, and campaign fundraising for all available candidates who appeared on the ballot in a primary or general election for the US House of Representatives between 1980 and 2020. Using this original data collection, we uncover a surprising finding: Candidates *without* prior elected experience are entering the US House of Representatives today at rates not seen since the widespread adoption of primaries. From the early 1980s to mid-2010s, about three-quarters of members newly elected to the US House of Representatives possessed previous elected experience; conversely, just half of all freshmen members elected from 2016 to 2020 held prior office.

In the analyses to follow, we examine emergence- and success-driven explanations for the declining

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proportion of experienced officeholders entering the US House. We first investigate whether amateurs are seeing greater success in modern elections because experienced candidates are running less often. We find no evidence, though, of any shifts in experienced candidates' emergence patterns across time. Instead, we show that candidates *without* elected experience are today emerging in greater numbers and more frequently running in open seats—the type of electoral context where experienced candidates emerge most often and have historically seen overwhelming electoral success (Banks & Kiewiet, 1989; Lazarus, 2008).

Given experienced candidates' consistent emergence patterns, we posit that their declining numbers in Congress must be attributable to election losses. Indeed, we show that experienced candidates are increasingly losing to amateurs in open-seat primaries. To investigate *why* experienced candidates are losing open-seat contests at higher rates, we model primary election success as a function of candidate characteristics and district conditions. In doing so, we find that the advantages conventionally afforded to candidates with elective experience are waning. Past research shows that experienced candidates are especially successful at fundraising; this indirect benefit of experience has contributed to experienced candidates' electoral dominance over amateurs (e.g., Berkman & Eisenstein, 1999; Squire & Wright, 1990). Our findings, though, indicate that experienced candidates have lost their fundraising edge; the majority of top fundraisers in recent elections are amateurs. Other research notes that the personal reputation associated with being a public servant has traditionally benefited prior officeholders (e.g., Mondak, 1995). We demonstrate that this direct effect of being a “quality” candidate no longer holds the same value it once did; other valence characteristics are increasingly predictive of electoral success. Among Republicans, more than half of recently elected amateur lawmakers are political “outsiders” with no connection to politics—elected or otherwise. Among Democrats, female and non-white candidates are more likely to win open-seat primaries than their male and white competitors. Importantly, the vast majority of female and non-white Democrats running and winning open seats today *lack elected experience*.

By engaging in an exploratory analysis of today's changed campaign environment, this article offers a reconsideration of long-held theories regarding candidate success. In particular, we demonstrate that the direct and indirect benefits attributed to prior elected experience have subsided. This shift away from experience aligns with well-documented trends within American and comparative politics toward growing public dissatisfaction with politicians and anti-establishment sentiment among voters (e.g.,

Carreras, 2012; Hansen & Treul, 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Uscinski et al., 2021). In certain respects, what we find here indicates that the same environment that fueled the successful nomination of Donald Trump in 2016 is playing out at the congressional level. Our results also align with scholarship demonstrating that the emergence of political outsiders in elections will increase in periods of high interparty polarization (Buisseret & Weelden, 2020). Furthermore, our findings offer support for theories on the centrality of identity politics to modern elections. In line with work by Porter et al. (forthcoming), we demonstrate that Democratic voters today place a premium on gender, racial, and ethnic diversity in candidate choice, especially within the context of primary elections. These identities align with social coalitions that are foundational to the Democratic Party (e.g., Fraga et al., 2020; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Lastly, this article raises questions about the costs and benefits of electing political amateurs to Congress. Having new voices in government is important, especially if these perspectives belong to people from groups underrepresented in lawmaking. These new voices could help increase representational diversity in a chamber that skews heavily toward white men and career politicians. On the other hand, the influx of candidates who lack legislative experience may be concerning for the institution as a whole. Existing work shows that politicians with previous legislative experience are especially effective at navigating Congress's complex policymaking environment (e.g., Volden & Wiseman, 2014). By the same token, amateur politicians may be especially *ineffective* lawmakers because they lack institutional knowledge and political acumen. It is an open question whether amateurs can compensate for their political inexperience by hiring an experienced staff (Ommundsen, 2023) or through learning-by-doing on the job (Miquel & Snyder, 2006). Additional work is warranted to further investigate how the recent influx of amateur legislators has affected both the quality of representation and Congress's capacity to govern.

INDIRECT AND DIRECT BENEFITS OF PRIOR ELECTED EXPERIENCE

Indirect benefits

Running a successful campaign for Congress often necessitates hiring pollsters, purchasing advertisements, and holding campaign events—all of which require money. Contemporary work on congressional elections consistently shows that candidate fundraising levels are highly predictive of future electoral victory (e.g., Biersack et al., 1993; Bonica, 2017). Among nonincumbents, Herrnson (1992) and

Berkman and Eisenstein (1999) identify candidates with previous elected experience as especially strong fundraisers. Experienced candidates' fundraising acumen stems, in part, from their access to established campaign infrastructure and preexisting networks of potential donors (Squire & Wright, 1990).

Candidates *without* elected experience are generally considered to be weak fundraisers. These amateurs often lack the professional and political connections needed to amass campaign contributions (Rauch & La Raja, 2017) and are not necessarily mounting serious campaigns (Canon, 1993). When amateurs *do* behave strategically, though, their fundraising disadvantage shrinks. Maestas and Rugeley (2008) find that the fundraising potential of ambitious amateurs can equal that of experienced candidates, conditional on self-selection into competitive races. Bonica (2020) similarly demonstrates that lawyers—who possess vast professional networks they can tap for fundraising—raise similar amounts of campaign contributions as experienced candidates.

There is reason to believe that the fundraising environment of congressional elections has changed in such a way that a career in politics no longer gives experienced candidates a systematic fundraising advantage. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) decision reversed financial restrictions placed on corporations and outside groups, which fundamentally increased the amount of money flowing into politics. Furthermore, in today's digital age, social media provides an alternate means for candidates to engage with potential donors; hiring political consultants or relying on party connections is no longer necessary. Indeed, Auter and Fine (2018) show that utilizing Facebook makes under-resourced candidates more competitive in attracting contributions from donors outside their immediate networks. Porter and Steelman (2023) similarly show that political amateurs have become increasingly successful at capturing the attention of coveted out-of-district donors. This all leads us to question whether experienced politicians today still possess the same fundraising edge over amateurs they once did.

Direct benefits

Voters prefer candidates who possess traits like honesty, integrity, experience, and competence; they view politicians who possess these attributes as higher-quality potential representatives (Buttice & Stone, 2012; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Mondak, 1995). Literature has long regarded past political experience as a rational heuristic used by voters to simplify the task of identifying candidates who might possess these kinds of desirable traits (Fiorina, 1981; Funk, 1997; Hirano & Snyder, 2019). Cues for candidate quality—like past

political experience—are particularly relevant in electoral contexts where partisanship is held constant, like primary elections (Kirkland & Coppock, 2018). The relationship between previous elected background and desirable personal traits has led many to refer to experienced candidates as “quality” candidates.

Being a traditional “quality” candidate, though, may no longer hold the same value it once did. Recent work suggests that voters today see *less* value in a candidate's political past and, instead, prefer occupational experience outside of politics (Arnesen et al., 2019). In particular, Hansen and Treul (2021) employ a survey experiment to demonstrate that voters prefer candidates who use anti-establishment rhetoric and that this message is even more powerful when delivered by an inexperienced candidate, as it is likely to be more credible. These results correlate with declining trust in and approval of politicians as well as rising anti-establishment sentiment (Sides et al., 2019; Uscinski et al., 2021). Accordingly, we suspect that voter dissatisfaction with Washington and “the establishment” could pave the way for inexperienced competitors who possess desirable valence characteristics beyond past elected experience.

ASSESSING ELECTED EXPERIENCE IN MODERN ELECTIONS

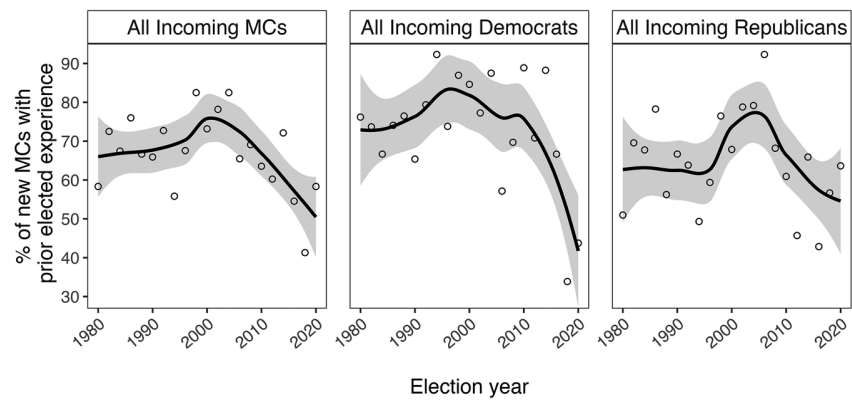
Today's changed electoral environment suggests a need to reevaluate—and potentially update—our understanding of the relationship between past elected experience and electoral success. In the analyses that follow, we tease out continuity and change across time in the dynamics of (1) congressional candidate emergence and (2) electoral success. To that end, we collected comprehensive data on past elected experience for all primary and general election candidates who appeared on the ballot for the US House of Representatives from 1980 to 2020 ($N = 31,106$).¹ The list of candidates included in our data was compiled from race summaries produced by American Votes and the Federal Election Commission.

Following the bulk of existing literature, we consider a nonincumbent candidate to be “experienced” if she currently holds or previously held a seat in public, elected office.² Information about each candidate's prior elected experience was manually coded from

¹ We do not collect information on write-ins or candidates who ran outside the regular election cycle.

² Per Hirano and Snyder (2019, 91), “to be effective at their job, legislators are expected to have skills such as drafting bills and shepherding them through the committee system...and working with party leaders.” Accordingly, we could consider candidates to only possess experience if they have prior service as a state legislator or member of Congress. Employing this definition in our descriptive analysis to follow produces a similar decline in the proportion of previous legislators reaching Congress in recent years. For reference, see Figure A1 (SI p. 1).

FIGURE 1 Percentage of freshmen members of the US House of Representatives with prior elected experience, 1980–2020. *Note:* In plotted percentages, the denominator includes all freshmen members of the US House in the left panel (i.e., no incumbents), freshmen Democrats in the middle panel, and freshmen elected Republicans in the right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those newly elected members who have previously held public elected office. Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle. LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data to visualize time trends.



newspaper archives, the Google News aggregator, official government biographies, online obituaries, social media profiles, and candidates' campaign websites.³ To provide confidence in our coding of candidate experience, we employed several verification strategies in our data collection process. First, we required two independent sources for information on candidate backgrounds to identify whether each candidate had past elected experience (1) or not (0). Using this approach, we successfully identified the elected backgrounds for about 92% of those candidates present in our data.⁴ Next, as a further validation step, we compared our data on candidate experience to other independent data collections that document candidates' elected backgrounds (Jacobson, 2015; Pettigrew et al., 2014; Thomsen, 2021).⁵ Through this approach, we identified 4706 candidates out of 22,804 nonincumbent challengers (15%) as having previously held public, elected office.

Employing these data, we plot the percentage of representatives newly elected to the US House who had elective experience prior to entering Congress. Figure 1 plots the percentage of all experienced freshmen members of Congress (MCs; left panel), Democratic experienced freshmen MCs (middle panel), and Republican experienced freshmen MCs (right panel). Per the left panel of Figure 1, the proportion of freshmen US House members with prior elected experience rose throughout the 1980s and 1990s, reaching an apex in the early 2000s with nearly 80% of new MCs having previously held elective office. However, over the last

two decades, this statistic has steadily declined, with only 50% of new members today having an elected background—a 30 percentage-point plummet from the early 2000s. This decline is especially noteworthy when examined by party, depicted in the middle and right panels of Figure 1. For much of this time series, a greater proportion of Democratic freshmen MCs possessed elected experience in comparison to Republicans. Since the mid-2000s, though, the proportion of freshmen Democrats with elected experience has decreased by about 40 percentage points, nearly double the decline seen among Republicans.

Building on this finding, our subsequent analyses investigate the correlates for experienced candidates' declining numbers among new members of Congress. Before further examining the relative success of experienced and amateur candidates at the ballot box, we descriptively and empirically evaluate the emergence patterns of these candidates. Perhaps recent changes in experienced candidates' emergence decisions can help to explain amateurs' growing electoral successes. Is it the case that amateurs today are seeing greater success at reaching Congress because experienced candidates are running less often?

CHANGING EMERGENCE PATTERNS

We begin by testing whether changing dynamics in candidate emergence have contributed to experienced politicians' declining numbers in Congress. We are particularly interested in assessing candidate emergence in open seats (i.e., districts with no incumbent running). Existing work demonstrates that candidates with elected experience most often emerge in open seats because this is the kind of contest that maximizes their probability of reaching Congress (e.g., Bianco, 1984; Jacobson, 1989; Lazarus, 2008); the vast majority of newly elected House members each year enter Congress via open seats. Examinations of emergence patterns among amateurs, on the other

³ Greater detail on our coding procedure is available in Appendix B (SI pp. 16–18).

⁴ We assume all candidates for whom we could not identify elected backgrounds to be inexperienced. We discuss trends in data missingness and the strength of this assumption in Appendix B.4 (SI p. 18). Importantly, we identify the elected backgrounds for all general election winners in our data, as well as 98.5% of candidates who won primaries for open seats and 99% of candidates who won primaries where at least one experienced candidate emerged.

⁵ We used these data sources to check our coding of candidate prior elected experience for all general election candidates who ran from 1980–2016 and all primary election candidates who ran from 1980–1988 as well as from 2000–2010.

hand, have shown that these candidates *are not* especially likely to run in open seats (e.g., Canon, 1990, 1993). Amateurs view their chances of besting a slate of experienced opponents in a competitive primary election as comparable to—or perhaps even less probable than—defeating an incumbent in the general election. Indeed, Banks and Kiewiet (1989) find that amateur candidates' electoral odds are maximized by challenging an opposite party *incumbent*. Changing emergence patterns among experienced candidates, though, could alter this dynamic. The resurgence of mass partisanship (Hetherington, 2001), decline of marginal districts (Jacobson & Carson, 2019), and increasing competitiveness of primary elections (Boatright, 2013) have all impacted the calculus candidates use to determine when to run. Under these conditions, experienced candidates may be less likely to run for office (Hall, 2019; Thomsen, 2017) and inexperienced or “outsider” candidates may be more likely to emerge (Buisseret & Weelden, 2020).

We fit a series of Poisson regressions to evaluate potential shifts in the emergence rates of experienced and amateur candidates across time. The unit of analysis is a US House district in an election from 1980 to 2020.⁶ In our Experienced Candidate models, the dependent variable is a count of candidates with prior elected experience who ran in a district; in our Amateur Candidate models, the dependent variable is a count of candidates without prior elected experience who ran in a district. Counts reflect the combined number of Democratic candidates and Republican candidates who emerged in each district.⁷ We estimate separate models for elections held in open seats and incumbent-held districts. Our main independent variable in all models is election year. If candidate emergence has declined, the relationship between candidate count and election year will be negative. If candidate emergence has increased, the relationship between candidate count and election year will be positive. To account for nonlinearity in candidate emergence rates across time, we specify election year as a categorical rather than a continuous variable.⁸ In all models, we account for institutional and electoral factors that could affect the number of candidates who emerge in any given contest, such as state primary election rules (e.g., open or closed primaries),

district partisanship (i.e., Democratic- or Republican-controlled district),⁹ previous incumbent vote share, and the number of districts in the state. We also specify state-level fixed effects to account for differences across states that may impact the number of candidates who emerge (e.g., variation in state population). Full models for candidate emergence can be found in Table A1 (SI pp. 4–5).

Based on these models, Figure 2 plots predicted counts of candidates running in open seats and incumbent-held districts by year from 1980 to 2020. The top row of plots in Figure 2 depicts predicted counts of experienced candidates who emerged in incumbent-held districts (left panel) and open seats (right panel). Following expectations, experienced candidates ran in open seats more often than in incumbent-held districts. A predicted count of three experienced candidates emerged in US House elections for open seats compared to less than one candidate in incumbent-held districts. Importantly, we find no noteworthy shift in the number of experienced candidates running in open seats across time. This finding fits with descriptive trends observed in the data: From 1980 to 2020, over 95% of open seats saw at least one experienced candidate emerge.

The bottom row of plots in Figure 2 depicts amateur candidate emergence in incumbent-held districts (left panel) and open seats (right panel) from 1980 to 2020. Following extant findings, rates of amateur candidate emergence in open seats and incumbent-held districts are relatively similar throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Since the mid-2000s, though, amateur candidate emergence rates across district contexts have diverged. The left panel of Figure 2 illustrates a slight increase in the number of amateurs running in incumbent-held districts for recent elections, from about three candidates to about four candidates. The right panel of Figure 2 depicts a much more notable increase in amateurs' emergence rates in open seats. Predicted counts for amateurs running in open seats have increased from about four candidates per district in the early 2000s to about five candidates in 2016, six candidates in 2018, and eight candidates in 2020. These increases are statistically distinct from emergence rates in prior decades.

In summary, our findings here offer no indication that experienced candidate emergence rates have declined across recent elections. Instead, our findings indicate that the number of *amateur* candidates running in open seats has increased irrespective of experienced candidates' continued emergence. Recall that open seats have historically seen modest amateur emergence because these races attract higher

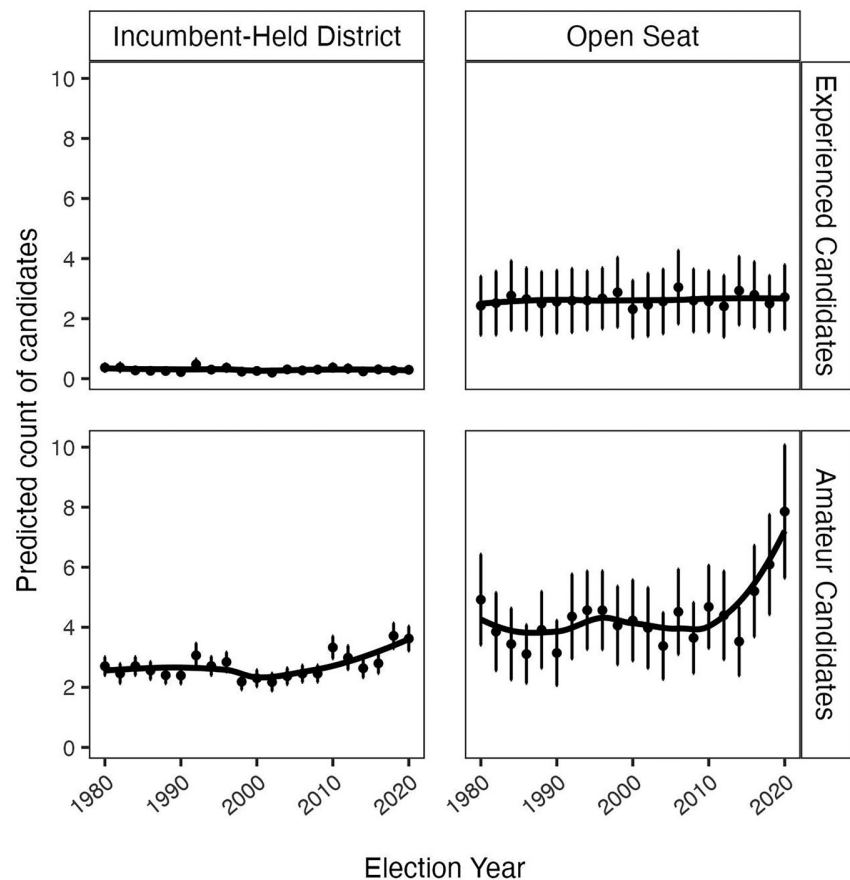
⁶ We exclude elections in states without partisan primary elections because the dynamics of competition in these districts are distinct. Including districts that hold nonpartisan primary elections in our analysis produces nearly identical results, which can be found in Figure A2 (SI p. 1).

⁷ Running models that reflect the partisan count of experienced/amateur candidate emergence produces similar findings and can be found in Figures A3 and A4 (SI p. 2).

⁸ Specifying year as continuous produces similar results, as shown in Figure A5 (SI p. 3). In models where election year is specified as continuous, we include year-level variables that could influence candidate emergence, such as presidential approval and percent real household income change (see Jacobson, 1989). Year-level variables cannot be included in our models presented here because they are perfectly identified by year fixed-effects.

⁹ If district boundaries are newly drawn, partisanship is determined using the district's average presidential vote share for that redistricting cycle. Removing these cases from our analysis produces substantively identical results.

FIGURE 2 Predicted count for experienced and amateur candidate emergence in congressional districts, 1980–2020. *Note:* Quantities of interest are predicted counts of the number of candidates with elected experience (top panels) and without elected experience (bottom panels) who emerged to run in incumbent-held districts (left panels) and open seats (right panels) for the US House from 1980 to 2020. Counts represent the total number of Democratic and Republican candidates who ran in a given congressional district. Predicted counts are simulated with observed data used to estimate models in Table A1 (SI, Pp. 4–5). LOESS regressions have been fit to the data to visualize time trends.



numbers of experienced candidates who, at least in the past, enjoyed greater electoral success due to the direct and indirect benefits of a prior elected background. Growing amateur emergence in open seats could perhaps indicate a change in perceptions regarding experienced candidates' electoral edge. In other words, more amateurs may be running in recent elections because they see their chances of beating experienced opponents as greater today than in the past. Accordingly, we next turn to a series of descriptive and empirical evaluations to determine whether the electoral advantages historically attributed to experienced candidates are diminishing.

SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF CANDIDATE SUCCESS

Given experienced candidates' consistent emergence patterns, their declining numbers in Congress must be attributable to election losses. To investigate *why* experienced candidates are losing at higher rates than in the past, we must first identify the kinds of elections where they are increasingly likely to lose. Figure 3 plots the proportion of general elections and primary elections where experienced candidates emerged and

won. As depicted in the left panel of Figure 3, experienced candidates' win rates in general elections have remained largely unchanged; if anything, they have increased slightly over time. Where experienced candidates seem to be losing more often is in primary elections. The middle panel of Figure 3 depicts a 25 percentage-point decrease over the past two decades in the proportion of primaries where experienced candidates emerged and won. This decline is especially pronounced in election years 2016, 2018, and 2020.

The declining success rate for experienced candidates is especially stark when solely examining primary elections in open seats. Per the right panel of Figure 3, experienced candidates have traditionally dominated in open-seat primaries, winning about 80% of contests where they emerged. Over the past 10 years, however, this success rate has plummeted by about 30 percentage points. Open-seat primaries are an especially strategic electoral context in modern elections given that the vast majority of congressional districts are safely partisan; in these races, winning the primary may be a candidate's only major obstacle to attaining office. Experienced candidates, though, are failing to gain their party's nomination in safely partisan open seats and, instead, are losing to amateurs who go on to win uncompetitive general elections.

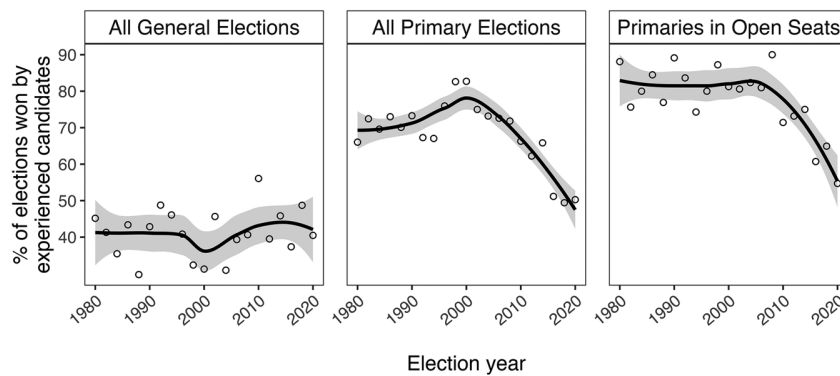


FIGURE 3 Percentage of elections where candidates with prior elected experience emerged and won, 1980–2020. *Note:* In plotted percentages, the denominator includes all contested general elections (left panel), primary elections (middle panel), and open-seat primaries (right panel) where at least one experienced candidate emerged to run. The numerator in each panel includes the number of elections where a candidate who previously held public elected office won. LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data to visualize time trends.

Accordingly, 70% of amateurs today are elected to Congress via open seats.

To understand why experienced candidates are no longer besting amateurs as often as they once did, we model candidate success in open-seat primaries from 1980 to 2020.¹⁰ We are particularly interested in assessing the extent to which the direct and indirect benefits of prior experience still afford candidates the electoral advantages they once did. In our models, the unit of analysis is a candidate who ran in a contested primary election for an open seat.¹¹ We exclude candidates running in top-two or blanket primaries.¹² The dependent variable is whether a candidate won the primary election. To account for dependencies across observations, models are estimated with standard errors clustered by year and district. Independent variables include candidate characteristics and electoral conditions that may influence electoral success. We estimate separate models by decade to capture changes in the relationship between these variables and electoral success across time.¹³ We estimate an additional model for contests that occurred in 2016, 2018, and 2020 because amateurs were especially likely to emerge and win in open seats for these recent elections. Finally, we estimate models by party to account for partisan differences in the kinds of candidate characteristics that might be predictive of success.

To measure the indirect benefits of prior elected experience, we include a predictor in our models for the total amount of campaign contributions (in

2020 dollars, logged) garnered by a candidate prior to his or her primary election.¹⁴ To measure the direct benefits of prior elected experience, we include a dichotomous indicator for whether a candidate has previously held public office. Having controlled for strategic emergence and fundraising ability, this variable should capture the unique effect that prior public service has on success. In our models, we additionally control for other candidate characteristics that may influence success, such as gender (male vs. female),¹⁵ race (non-Hispanic white vs. non-white),¹⁶ and ideological extremity as estimated by Bonica (2023). We also control for district conditions that may affect candidates' electoral fortunes, including district partisanship (same-party safe, other-party safe, or competitive), state primary election rules (open vs. closed rules), the non-white population percentage in the

¹⁰ Estimating our models with all nonincumbent primary elections (i.e., incumbent-held races as well as open seats) produces substantively similar results. These are available for review in Table A3 (SI p. 7).

¹¹ Uncontested primaries are excluded because the dynamics of competition in these races are uninformative for determining the kinds of candidate characteristics that are related to electoral success.

¹² We exclude candidates who ran in elections with top-two or nonpartisan blanket primaries (i.e., California, Louisiana, Washington, and Alaska) because the dynamics of competition in these types of elections are systematically distinct from conditions in partisan primaries.

¹³ Election years included in our 1980s model occurred from 1980 to 1988, election years included in our 1990s model occurred from 1990 to 1999, election years included in our 2000s model occurred from 2000 to 2009, and election years included in our 2010s model occurred from 2010 to 2020.

¹⁴ Pre-primary fundraising includes totals garnered from individual contributions, political action committees, and personal contributions. We find that pre-primary fundraising is a good proxy for overall fundraising ability; candidates' pre-primary and post-primary fundraising correlate at 0.73. Data are collected from candidates' quarterly and pre-election filing reports to the Federal Election Commission. In select instances during the 1980s and 1990s, candidates' midyear reports do not align with primary election dates. In these cases, pre-primary fundraising was imputed by dividing the total fundraising amount reported by the number of days covered in the report; this daily amount was then multiplied by the number of days in the reporting period that occurred prior to a candidate's primary.

¹⁵ Gender was determined using pronouns found in candidate biographies as well as media coverage of elections. In the few instances where pronoun data were unavailable, gender was determined exclusively using candidate names. These data have been validated using other independently collected sources for data on candidate gender produced by Bonica (2023) and Hassell (2017).

¹⁶ Fine-grained data on candidate race and ethnicity were collected; however, discretizing individuals into more specific ethnoracial categories produced candidate subsets that were too small to effectively model. Data on candidate race were generously provided for primary election candidates running from 2018 to 2020 by Porter et al. (forthcoming) and primary candidates running from 2008 to 2012 by Grumbach and Sahn (2020). The authors coded candidate race/ethnicity for primary election candidates running from 2000 to 2006 as well as in 2016. We follow the approach laid out by Grumbach and Sahn (2020) to code candidate racial/ethnic backgrounds and, when data were unavailable, employ the latest version of the *wru* package proposed by Imai et al. (2022) to impute candidate race. Imputations were made for candidate race/ethnicity for less than 10% of candidates in our sample, with most of these candidates running in elections during the early 2000s. Due to coverage issues and data limitations, we limit our coding of race and ethnicity to elections held over the last two decades.

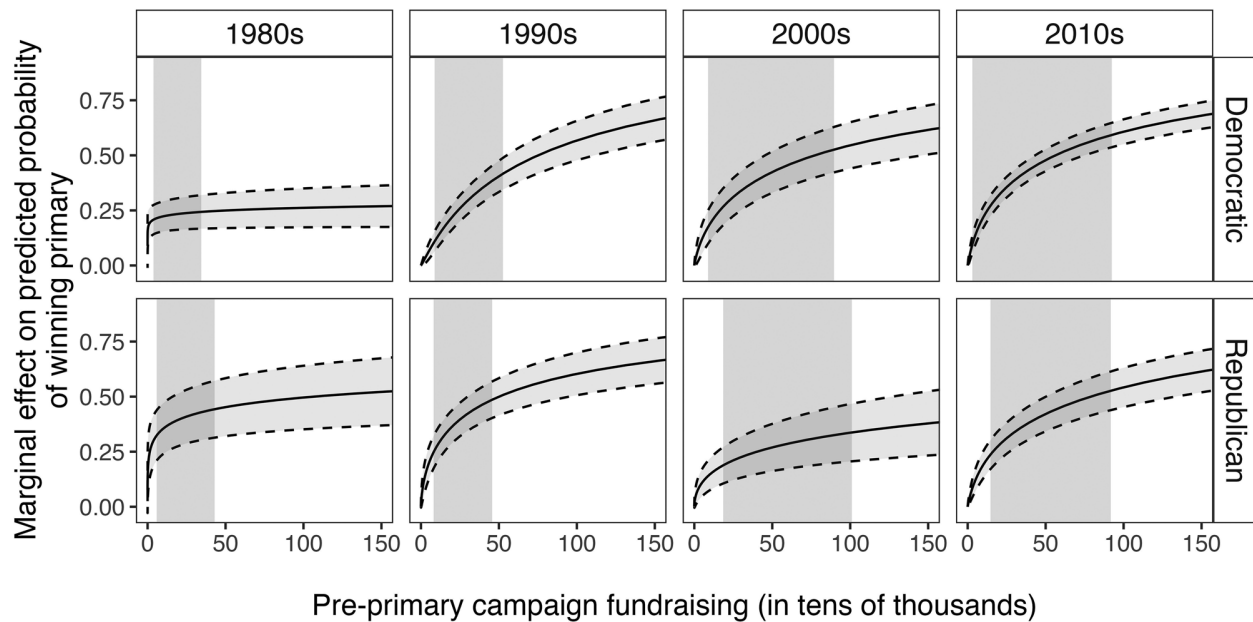


FIGURE 4 Marginal effect of pre-primary fundraising on the predicted probability of winning open-seat primary elections. *Note.* Quantities of interest are marginal effects of pre-primary fundraising on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats. Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table A2 (SI p. 6). Pre-primary fundraising is varied across the observed minimum to maximum value for each decade. Shaded areas represent the 25th through 75th percentiles of fundraising among candidates for each decade. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

district, and the number of experienced opponents in the election. Model results are presented in Table A2 (SI p. 6). We find that campaign fundraising is still an apt predictor for electoral success, but the fundraising gap between experienced and inexperienced candidates (i.e., the indirect benefit of prior experience) has declined over time. Next, we show that the personal reputation associated with being a public servant (i.e., the direct benefit of prior experience) no longer holds the same value it once did, particularly among Republicans. Each of these components is discussed and explored in greater detail below.

Indirect benefit: Campaign fundraising

Turning first to candidate fundraising, Figure 4 plots the marginal effect of fundraising on the predicted probability that a candidate wins her primary.¹⁷ For ease of interpretation, logged fundraising has been transformed to real dollars (in tens of thousands) on the x -axis.¹⁸ To place candidate fundraising in context

across time, shaded areas represent the 25th through 75th percentiles of fundraising among candidates for each decade.

Per the top left panel of Figure 4, Democrats running in the 1980s who fell in the 75th percentile of campaign fundraisers—garnering \$344,315 in pre-primary receipts—had a 24% greater predicted probability of primary election victory than did candidates who did not fundraise, holding all else constant. Per the top right panel of Figure 4, Democrats running in the 2010s who fell in the 75th percentile of campaign fundraisers—garnering \$928,162 in pre-primary receipts—had a 59% greater predicted probability of victory. A similar relationship can be seen among Republicans in the bottom row of plots in Figure 4. Per the bottom left panel of Figure 4, Republicans running in the 1980s who fell in the 75th percentile of campaign fundraisers—garnering \$430,090 in pre-primary receipts—had a 44% greater predicted probability of primary election victory than did candidates who did not fundraise. Per the bottom right panel of Figure 4, Republicans running in the 2010s who fell in the 75th percentile of campaign fundraisers—garnering \$916,765 in pre-primary receipts—had a 53% greater predicted probability of victory. Although the volume of fundraising has increased in recent elections, we *do not find* that the marginal effect of fundraising on success has changed. In Figure A8 (SI p. 9), we demonstrate that since the 1990s, the relationship

¹⁷ Plots depicting the marginal effect of fundraising on primary election outcomes for 2016–2020 follow trends observed in Figure 4 and can be found in Figure A6 (SI p. 8).

¹⁸ Plots employing logged total fundraising along the x -axis are presented in Figure A7 (SI p. 8).

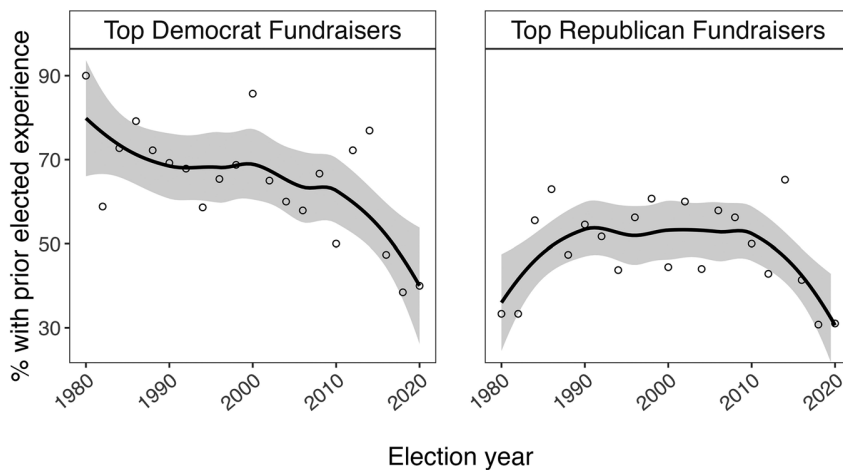


FIGURE 5 Percentage of top fundraisers with prior elected experience, 1980–2020. *Note:* In plotted percentages, the denominator includes all Democratic (left) and Republican (right) top fundraisers for open-seat primary elections. The numerator in each panel includes the number of top fundraisers who previously held public elected office. We define top fundraisers as candidates who fell in the top 25% of all candidates who fundraised in the primary. LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data to visualize time trends.

between fundraising and success has not significantly increased for either party.¹⁹

We next evaluate whether experienced candidates still outperform their amateur counterparts in raising campaign funds. To assess fundraising success across candidate types, we calculate the proportion of top fundraisers who possess past elected experience for each election year. Following the findings presented above, we consider a candidate to be a top fundraiser if her pre-primary campaign receipts fell in the top 25% of all candidates running in that decade.²⁰ Top fundraising Democrats met or exceeded the following fundraising amounts: \$344,315 (1980s), \$526,069 (1990s), \$896,119 (2000s), and \$928,162 (2010s). Top fundraising Republicans met or exceeded the following fundraising amounts: \$430,090 (1980s), \$456,666 (1990s), \$1,010,232 (2000s), and \$916,765 (2010s). For reference, the marginal effect of fundraising on success for top fundraisers would fall to the right of the shaded areas for plots in Figure 4.

Plotted proportions for top fundraisers broken down by past elected experience are presented in Figure 5. Per the left panel of Figure 5, from the 1980s to the early 2010s about 70% of top fundraising Democrats had a prior elected background. Conversely, from 2016 to 2020, less than 35% of top Democratic fundraisers possessed previous elected experience. A similar trend holds for Republicans, presented in the right panel of Figure 5. From the 1980s to the early 2010s, about half

of top Republican fundraisers had prior elected experience; for 2016 to 2020, this figure dropped to 25%. Taken together, these results indicate that experienced candidates' fundraising edge has attenuated significantly in recent elections. Today, amateurs outperform experienced candidates as competitive fundraisers in open-seat primaries.

Direct benefit: Prior experience

Figure 6 plots the marginal effect of prior elected experience on success in open-seat primaries for models present in Table A2 (SI p. 6).²¹ Values falling above the horizontal line indicate that past elective experience has a positive, statistically significant relationship with electoral success in open-seat primaries. Figure 6 clearly demonstrates that, for many decades, past elected experience has served as a consistent, statistically significant predictor for primary election success—but this is changing. Per the left panel of Figure 6, experienced Democrats in the 1990s and 2000s were at least 15% more likely to win an open-seat primary than were amateurs, holding all else equal. For Democrats running over the last decade, the marginal effect of elected experience on primary success was about 7%.²² Turning to the right panel of Figure 6, experienced Republicans in the 1980s through 2000s were about 18% more likely to win an open-seat primary than were amateurs, holding all else equal. However, in elections today, there is no statistical relationship between elected experience and success for Republicans. In Figure A12 (SI p. 11), we show that this decline in the marginal effect of

¹⁹ To assess the changing value of pre-primary fundraising across time, we fit regressions by party where candidate fundraising is interacted with a categorical variable for election decade. Model results are presented in Table A4 (SI p. 12). Yearly comparisons for the marginal effect of pre-primary fundraising over time are presented in Figure A8 (SI p. 9).

²⁰ Replicating this approach such that top fundraisers were considered to be those candidates who met or exceeded the fundraising potential of the top 25th percentile of primary election winners (rather than all fundraisers) produces results with the same substantive takeaways. These are presented in Figure A9 (SI p. 9). Greater amateur fundraising in recent elections is also evident when assessing the total number of amateurs who met or exceeded the fundraising potential of experienced candidates. These findings are presented in Figure A10 (SI p. 10).

²¹ Plots depicting the marginal effect of prior elected experience on primary election outcomes for 2016–2020 follow trends observed in Figure 6 and can be found in Figure A11 (SI p. 10).

²² The left panel of Figure A12 (SI p. 11) demonstrates that this decrease in the marginal effect of past elected experience on electoral success is not statistically significant.

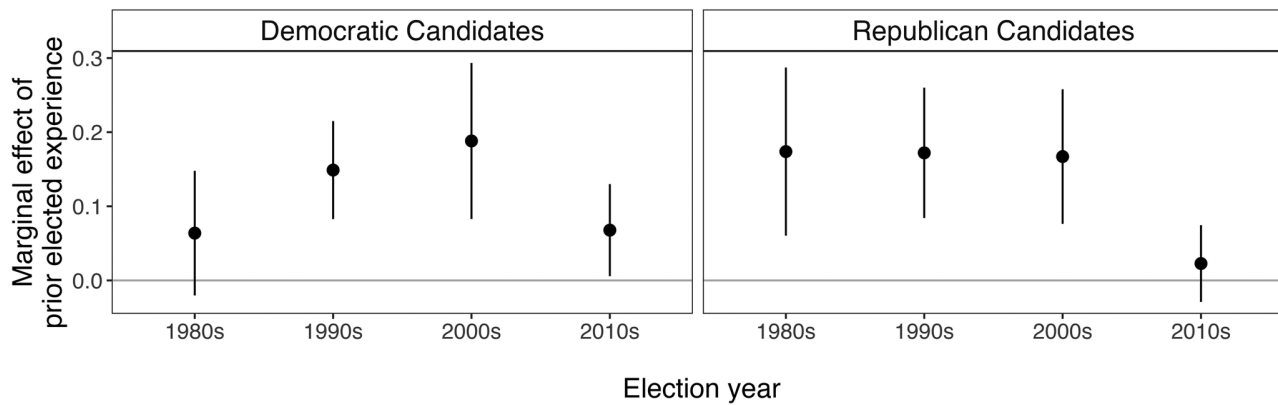


FIGURE 6 Marginal effect of prior elected experience on the predicted probability of winning open-seat primary elections. *Note:* Quantities of interest are marginal effects of possessing past elected experience on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats. Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table A2 (SI p. 6). Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

elected experience among Republican candidates is statistically significant.

MOVING BEYOND ELECTED EXPERIENCE

Having explored the direct and indirect benefits traditionally afforded to candidates with prior elective experience, we look to other valence characteristics that may offer electoral advantages to candidates today. Following our results presented in Table A2 (SI p. 6), we specifically examine whether a political “outsider” identity has benefited Republicans in recent elections and whether descriptive identities tied to race and gender have benefited Democrats.²³

Political outsiders

Our findings in Figure 6 indicate that prior elected experience no longer provides Republican candidates with a direct electoral benefit. This result *suggests* that candidates without political experience may today gain an electoral advantage but does not explicitly demonstrate such a relationship. Investigating this question presents somewhat of a challenge with available data. Many amateurs who emerge in congressional elections do not run to win but, rather, emerge for their own purposes. Some run to draw attention to a particular issue or policy (Maisel, 1986), others are clearly “hopeless” (Canon, 1990), and still

others are seeking experience for a future electoral bid (Canon, 1993; Roberds & Roberts, 2002). For empirical analyses, separating out these “hopeless” amateurs from those who are mounting a strategic run for office is crucial. Prior work has identified “ambitious” amateurs as those candidates who defeat an experienced primary opponent (e.g., Maestas & Rugeley, 2008), but this would be endogenous for our purposes.²⁴ Moreover, recent work identifies particular *kinds* of amateurs as preferential in modern elections—specifically those without a background in politics (Arnesen et al., 2019; Hansen & Treul, 2021)—but not all amateurs are political “outsiders.” Roberds and Roberts (2002) demonstrate that many amateurs possess explicit or implicit ties to politics (see also Bonica, 2017). Identifying the political histories for all candidates in our data—especially for those who ran in earlier decades—is impractical.

Instead, we descriptively evaluate the political backgrounds of general election winners. We calculate the percentage of newly elected, amateur MCs who possessed no background in politics (elected or otherwise) prior to entering Congress. Following Roberds and Roberts (2002), we consider amateur MCs to possess nonelected, political experience if they served as an appointed official (e.g., gubernatorial cabinet member) or had a career explicitly connected to politics or government (e.g., lobbyist, political organizer, or congressional aide).²⁵ Following the terminology of Canon (2011) and Buisseret and Weelden (2020), we

²⁴ Repeat runs for office has also been used as an indicator for amateur quality, but these results have produced mixed findings (see Mack, 1998).

²⁵ A full list of occupational backgrounds included in our coding is available in Table A5 (SI p. 15). Following existing literature, we consider lawyers to have an expressly political occupation. Treating lawyers as nonpolitical amateurs produces similar results, available for review in Figure A14 (SI p. 13). In our data collection, we also identified whether an amateur had political family ties. Including these individuals as political amateurs produces substantively identical results, available for review in Figure A15 (SI p. 13).

²³ Following results in Table A2 (SI p. 6), we do not find a candidate’s ideological extremity (i.e., CFscore) to be a statistically significant predictor for success in recent elections. We explore candidate ideology further in Figure A13 (SI p. 11) and demonstrate that, although new MCs have become more extreme over time, there is no notable difference in the extremity of experienced and inexperienced freshmen MCs. For these reasons, we do not explore ideological extremity further in this analysis.

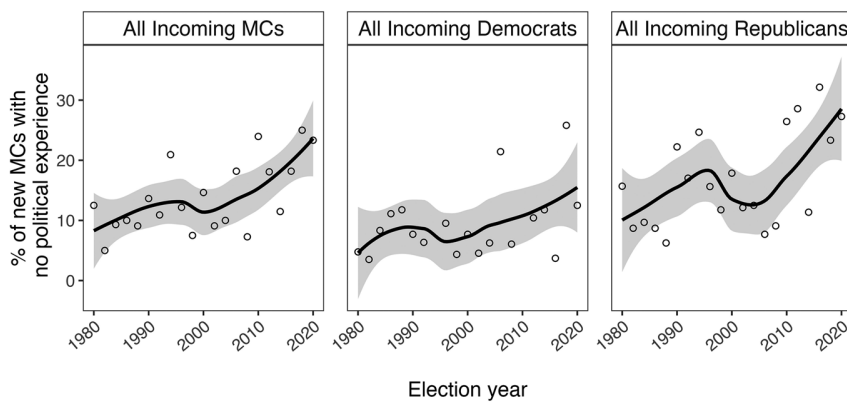


FIGURE 7 Percentage of freshmen members of the US House of Representatives with no political/elected experience, 1980–2020. *Note:* In plotted yearly percentages, the denominator includes all newly elected, freshmen members of the US House of Representatives (i.e., no incumbents) in the left panel, newly elected Democrats in the middle panel, and newly elected Republicans in the right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those newly elected members who have no previous elected or political experience (i.e., outsiders). Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle. LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data to visualize time trends.

refer to candidates who possess no elected or political experience as “outsiders.” To compile political histories on all newly elected MCs from 1980 to 2020 ($N = 1326$), we relied on member biographies provided by the Office of the Historian for the US House of Representatives, personal profiles from the media, and other biographical summaries (e.g., obituaries). Among amateurs identified as having no political ties, common occupations were business owner/executive (46%), military officer (25%), and medical professional (19%).²⁶

Figure 7 plots the percentage of all freshmen MCs (left panel), Democratic freshmen MCs (middle panel), and Republican freshmen MCs (right panel) who entered Congress *without* elected or political experience. Put differently, this plot depicts the percentage of political outsiders elected to Congress across time. As shown in the left panel of Figure 7, the percentage of new MCs without a political background has steadily increased. Until the mid-2000s, only about 10% of new members entered Congress without any elected or political experience. In recent elections, though, about a quarter of new MCs entering Congress were outsiders. Per the middle and right panels of Figure 7, this increase has been chiefly driven by newly elected Republicans. For Democrats, the percentage of newly elected MCs without political ties has increased modestly from about 10% to 15%. Conversely, nearly 30% of new Republican members since 2010 were outsiders, compared to about 15% in the past. Among Republicans in the last decade, the majority of newly elected, amateur MCs have lacked political ties.²⁷

These descriptive results contribute to a nascent body of work documenting the rising electoral success of political outsiders. In particular, Buisseret and

Weelden (2020) propose a formal model demonstrating that outsiders will be especially likely to reach office in periods of intense interparty polarization via electorally advantageous primary elections. Our results are remarkably consistent with their conclusions. Moreover, our findings for asymmetric outsider preferences by party line up with work by Canon (2011) and Enders and Uscinski (2021), who note that anti-establishment attitudes tend to be more closely linked to Republicanism/conservatism.²⁸ Taken together, the results presented here seem to suggest that conditions in modern elections are ripe for outsider candidates to thrive, especially among Republicans.

Racial and gender identity

We additionally identify candidate race and gender in Table A2 (SI p. 6) as descriptive identities that are today associated with elevated electoral success, but only for Democrats. To illustrate this, Figure 8 plots the marginal effect of possessing a female or non-white identity on a candidate's predicted probability of winning an open-seat primary for elections held in the 2010s. Plots depicting marginal effects for all other decades are available in Figure A17 (SI p. 14). The left panel of Figure 8 demonstrates that moving from a male to female identity increases a Democrat's predicted probability of primary election victory by nearly 8%, holding all else constant. Moving from a white to non-white identity increases a Democrat's predicted probability of primary election victory by 15%. Turning to the right panel of Figure 8, possessing a female identity *decreases* a Republican's probability of primary election victory by about 7%. Republicans possessing a non-white identity were not any more likely to win

²⁶ These categories are not mutually exclusive.

²⁷ The plotted yearly percentages for the number of amateur MCs without political experience out of all newly elected amateurs can be found in Figure A16 (SI p. 14).

²⁸ Importantly, anti-establishment orientations are distinct from left-right orientations (see Uscinski et al., 2021).

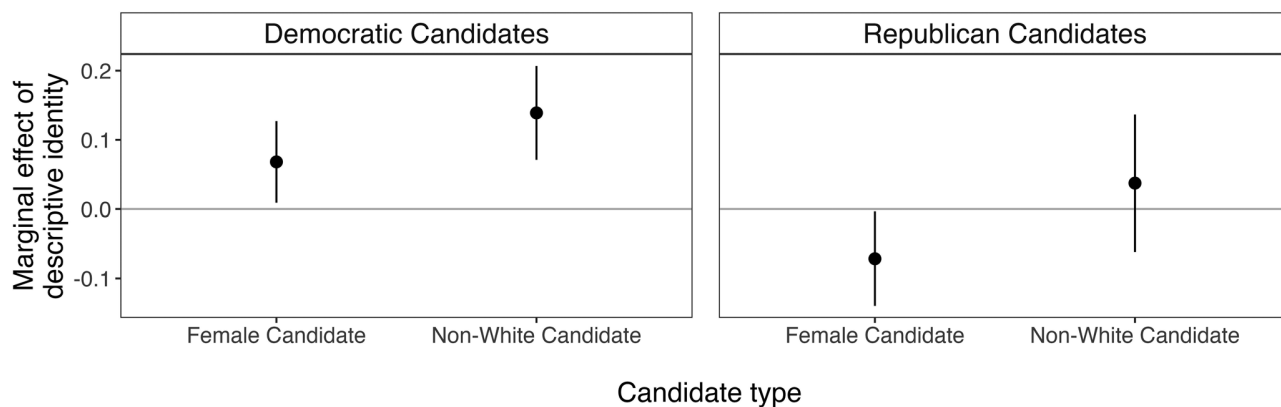
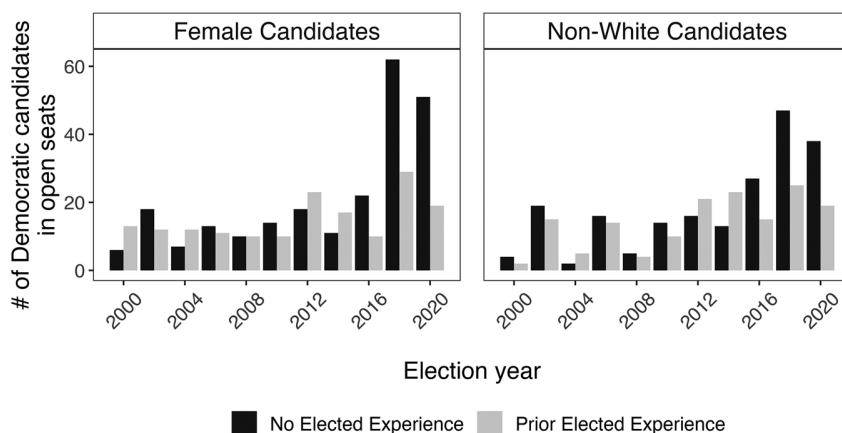


FIGURE 8 Marginal effect of descriptive identities on predicted probability of winning open-seat primary elections. *Note:* Quantities of interest are marginal effects of female and non-white identities on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats for Democrats (left panel) and Republicans (right panel). Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table A2 (SI p. 6). Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE 9 Number of female/non-white Democrats running in open-seat primaries by past political experience, 2000–2020. *Note:* Bars represent the number of female (left panel) and non-white (right panel) candidates running in open-seat primaries from 2000 to 2020. Dark bars include female/non-white Democrats who had no elected experience before running for Congress. Light bars include female/non-white Democrats who had elected experience.



an open-seat primary. These asymmetric results align with extant work demonstrating that the Democratic Party is more closely aligned with descriptive identities related to race and gender (e.g., Crowder-Meyer & Cooperman, 2018; Elder, 2021; Kitchens & Swers, 2016; Saltzer & McGrath, 2022).

Given our preceding analyses, we are additionally interested in the intersection between past political experience and candidate gender, race, or ethnicity. A wide body of literature has developed documenting the fact that women and racial/ethnic minorities feel they must accrue substantial experience before running for elected office (e.g., Carey & Lizotte, 2017; Lawless & Fox, 2010; Pearson & McGhee, 2013). Accordingly, Figure 9 plots the number of female (left panel) and non-white (right panel) Democrats running in open-seat primaries from 2000 to 2020, conditional on prior elected experience. Several notable patterns emerge. First, the number of female and non-white Democrats emerging in open seats over the past two elections has more than doubled; increases in candidate emergence are most notable in 2018 and 2020. Second, this recent increase

in female/non-white candidate emergence among Democrats is principally driven by candidates who *lack* elected experience. Importantly, inexperienced female and non-white Democrats are not only running more often, but they are also being elected to Congress more often. During the 2000s, 70% of newly elected female Democrats possessed prior elected experience. In 2018 and 2020, over 70% of newly elected female Democrats possessed *no prior elected experience*.²⁹ Similarly, during the 2000s, about 80% of newly elected non-white Democrats possessed prior elected experience; today, the majority of non-white Democrats elected to Congress are amateurs.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Historically, candidates who have previously held public elected office have outperformed candidates with no prior experience in office. These candidates'

²⁹ These rates are plotted in the left panel of Figure A18 (SI p. 15).
³⁰ These rates are plotted in the right panel of Figure A18 (SI p. 15).

electoral advantage has been attributed to the direct (e.g., Mondak, 1995) and indirect (e.g., Herrnson, 1990) benefits associated with prior elective history. Accordingly, countless studies have employed prior elected experience as an observable indicator for candidate viability (e.g., Bonica, 2020; Lazarus, 2008; Maestas et al., 2006; Squire & Wright, 1990; Thomsen, 2014). In this article, we seek to renew the scholarly conversation surrounding elected experience. Today, having an elected background is no longer the consistent predictor for success that it once was. Indeed, we demonstrate that in modern elections, inexperienced candidates are elected to Congress at rates similar to those of experienced candidates.

Our primary analyses investigate the factors associated with inexperienced candidate success in today's electoral environment. In the past, amateur success was largely considered to be the product of exceptional electoral circumstances (Canon, 1990, 1993). We find that in elections today, some amateurs' campaigns have begun to more closely resemble those of "high-quality" experienced candidates. We go on to identify other valence characteristics beyond prior elected experience as electorally advantageous in today's elections and, importantly, demonstrate that these desirable identities overwhelmingly belong to candidates who lack elected experience. In other words, the attributes that set *inexperienced* candidates apart from their experienced counterparts help to explain amateurs' increasing electoral success.


It is still the case that many candidates running in elections today have little to no chance of success, and these "hopeless" contenders disproportionately lack elected experience (Canon, 1993; Thomsen, 2023). However, prior officeholding is no longer the reliable metric for candidate viability that it once was—with increased frequency, amateurs are mounting credible and successful campaigns for Congress. Researchers should carefully consider our findings when investigating questions that center upon candidate quality.

We are hopeful that this initial exploratory analysis spurs future scholarly research assessing the causes and consequences of amateurs' increased presence in Congress. Open questions remain regarding the origins of amateur candidates' growing success. For one, is today's growing trend toward amateur candidate success the product of elite support for these candidates, or mass preferences? What is the relationship between candidate valence characteristics and out-of-district fundraising support (Gimpel et al., 2008)? Furthermore, what are the consequences of electing more amateur legislators to Congress? Additional work is warranted to better understand the relationship between political amateurism and today's changed electoral landscape.

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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