The Selling of Experience in the 2022 Congressional Elections

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Abstract:
Past experience in elective office has always been the best predictor of congressional candidate success in elections. These "quality" candidates come into elections with experience fundraising, name recognition, and general knowledge about how to run a successful campaign. Yet, recent congressional elections have seen an increase in the electoral success of *inexperienced* candidates. As past experience in office may no longer be valued as it once was, how are these experienced candidates marketing themselves to voters? Are they still leaning into their past experience in elected office or are they more likely to emphasize other occupations and experiences? We expect candidates brand themselves, emphasizing different experiences, based on the type of election they are in and who they are running against. In order to test these expectations, this paper examines all available biography pages of experienced candidates who ran in congressional primaries in 2022. We find clear partisan differences in what candidates past occupational backgrounds they highlight. We find mixed evidence that decisions about what occupations to emphasize vary based on electoral dynamics.

Political science literature has long noted that one of the best predictors of congressional candidate success in elections is whether the candidate previously served in elective office (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Jacobson and Kernell (1981) suggest that the "quality of candidates can be measured by their prior officeholding experience" (30), and they demonstrate that these "quality candidates" fare far better than those without experience in congressional elections.

Implied in the operationalization of quality candidates is that these experienced officeholders have several attributes that contribute to their success. First, they know how to raise funds and run a successful campaign (Abramowitz 1991, Box-Steffensmeier 1996); they are adept at choosing when to seek office (Jacobson 1981, Jacobson 1989, Cox 1996); and they start most races with a high level of name recognition (Grimmer 2013, Kam and Zechmeister 2013). Literature also notes that voters tend to support incumbents and quality candidates because of their experience, and perceived viability (e.g. Gronke 2000; Utych and Kam 2014). Voters are often familiar with experienced candidates either by virtue of them being incumbents or because they have held lower-level offices locally and done things for the community (e.g. Fiorina 1987, Jacobson and Carson 2016). That is, voters use incumbency and prior experience in lower office as a heuristic for knowledge and ability to do the job (e.g. Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Using prior experience as a shortcut to help determine vote choice is advantageous for voters as it does not require paying close attention to campaign rhetoric and policy positions—something voters are known for not doing well (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Zaller 1992, Achen and Bartels 2017). Current or prior experience in office is likely to be an even more important shortcut for voters in primary elections, as the partisan label is no longer available (Kirkland and Coppock 2018). This aforementioned research suggests that incumbents and those with prior experience in elected office should emphasize their experience when running for (re)election in primary elections.

Yet, despite these experience advantages, recent congressional primary campaigns have seen an increase in the success of *inexperienced* candidates (Porter and Treul 2019). Some of these inexperienced candidates are then going on to find success in general elections. In fact, at the start of the 118th Congress (2023-2025), 27 (37%) freshmen members of the U.S. House of Representatives had no prior experience in elective office. Figure 1 shows the increase over time of inexperienced freshmen entering the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980-2022.

Voters are casting ballots in primaries for candidates with no prior elective office experience, as well as for those espousing "Washington outsider" rhetoric. Related research by Hansen and Treul (2021) finds that it is not so much that voters necessarily favor inexperienced candidates over experienced candidates, but that voters have an affinity for anti-establishment (i.e. outsider) rhetoric, and that this type of communication is often best delivered, or at least most credibly delivered, by an inexperienced candidate.
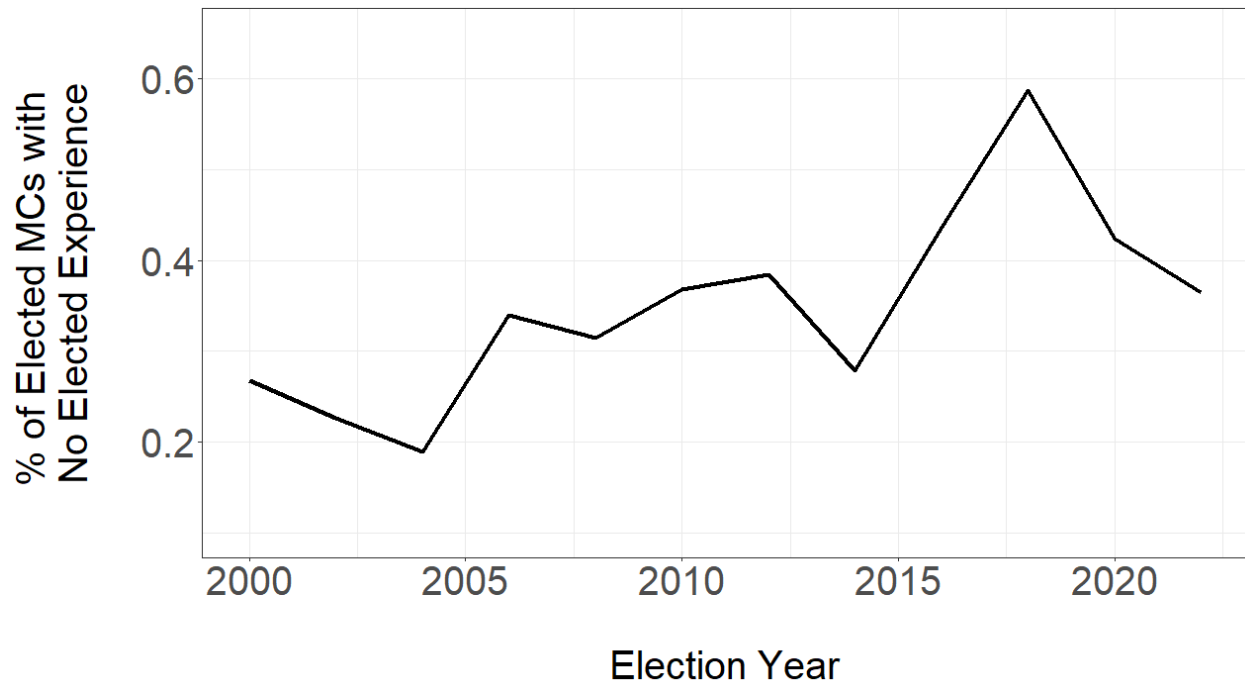
Figure 1: Percent of Incoming Freshmen with no prior experience in elected office

Regardless of the reason(s) for the success of inexperienced candidates, it is clear that voters are infatuated with them. This suggests experienced candidates might need to present themselves differently than they did in the past. That is, if the "presentation of self" used by inexperienced candidates is the one voters are seemingly drawn to today, experienced candidates might need to adjust their own style (Fenno 1977). Given this new campaign environment, this paper asks how are *experienced* candidates responding? More specifically, we examine how *experienced* candidates are (re)branding themselves now that one of their best assets (i.e. experience) is valued less than it once was. To do this, this paper analyzes how experienced candidates discussed their past occupations in the 2022 midterm elections. In this new political environment that appears more favorable than ever before to inexperienced candidates, how do experienced candidates brand themselves? Do they still emphasize their past service in government or do they play that down and highlight other past occupational pursuits? How does the type of race (e.g. open seat, safe seat, the presence of other quality candidates) influence these choices?

Past literature on the virtues of incumbency would lead us to expect that incumbents and quality challengers should highlight their political experience and acumen in their campaign communication. On the other hand, recent literature tracking the success of inexperienced candidates and showcasing voter affinity for outsider candidates, leads us to expect incumbents, and quality candidates more generally, will vary in the extent to which they lean into their political experience in their campaign communication.

Digital Campaign Rhetoric

Congressional campaigns allow candidates an opportunity to present themselves to voters and the public. An increasingly important part of a campaign is a candidate's online presence. One component of crafting a digital brand is for the candidate to communicate why she is qualified to serve in the U.S. Congress. Campaign websites allow candidates for Congress the opportunity to build their personal brand awareness. Creating a detailed website provides voters, media, and other interested political observers in-depth insight into the candidate. The goal of the website is to spread the word and establish a brand for the candidate that voters will identify with. Therefore, what a candidate chooses to put on a website tells us a lot about what that candidate values, what she thinks makes her worthy of voters' support, and what qualifies her for serving in Congress.

Voters look to candidates to learn not just about their policy positions and ideas, but also what about their background prepares them to be a legislator, and how the candidates' past experiences will help them serve in the legislature and represent the constituency. One of the goals of campaign communication and the creation of a digital brand is to give voters something to base their decisions on. Candidates do this by emphasizing their preferred criteria. As a part of brand development, candidates have choices regarding the narrative they tell. They can choose to emphasize certain parts of their biography and their occupational history over others. We assume that the choices made my candidates regarding what past experiences to emphasize are based on what they think best prepares them for Congress and what voters in their district will find attractive. Given this, what plays well in one district or under certain conditions might not play as well in another.

Although it is unlikely that most voters are visiting campaign websites, Druckman et al. (2009) note that campaign websites are a useful place to study candidate behavior, as they provide an "unmediated, holistic, and representative portrait of campaigns" (343). Druckman et al. (2009) suggest that since space on a website is unlimited, the campaign website can reflect the entirety of the campaign's rhetorical communication strategy. This sets websites apart from short advertisements or soundbites meant for a space-restricted press releases or character limited social media posts. They are also, according to Druckman et al. (2009) "unmediated." That is, the campaign determines the content as opposed to the media coverage of campaigns. One final advantage of campaign websites is that they are fairly universally used by campaigns. Not all candidates in primary elections can afford advertisements or get the attention of journalists, but most of them do have campaign websites. For all of these reasons we examine the campaign websites of 1,836 candidates who ran for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2022 to examine how experienced candidates brand themselves in this new campaign environment.

Data

For this paper, we specifically focus on the biography pages of the campaign websites for candidates running in primary elections for the U.S House of Representatives. We are particularly interested in what prior occupations candidates mention on the biography pages of their websites. According to McDonald et al. (2020), biography pages, sometimes labeled "About me" or "Why Me" pages, are the place for candidates to make a case for why they are the

best for the job. Similarly, Schneider (2014) notes that these pages are where "different aspects of personal history are adjusted in accordance with a strategic plan" (281), making them a great place to see how candidates attempt to relate to voters and showcase their relevant experience. These pages are perfect for understanding candidate rhetoric around past experiences and how different types of candidates in different types of races might highlight their past occupations.

We collected biographical text from all candidates who had a campaign website and ran in a congressional primary election during the 2022 election. To do this, we first started by compiling the names of all candidates who were listed as running on each state's Secretary of State website or Board of Elections website. For our purposes, we focused specifically on candidates running as either Democrats or Republicans and excluded third-party candidates. From there, we searched for each candidates' official campaign website. In more than 90% of cases, candidates' websites were listed on the website Politics1.com. The remaining pages were found through either links on candidates' social media platforms, a Google search for candidates' name and district, or on Ballotpedia.com.

We successfully identified 1,836 primary candidate websites in 2022. This is 89.7% percent of all candidates who ran for their party's nomination.[1] Among the 171 candidates we could not find a website for, only 29 won their primary election (of which, 15 were uncontested primary elections) and none of these candidates won the general election. Further, only 4 of the candidates missing a website had prior elected experience; the majority of candidates without a website were political amateurs with little chance of being elected to Congress.

For each campaign website, a team of coders collected text on the website related to each candidates' biographical background in the week prior to the primary election date. In many cases, this was a dedicated "Meet [Candidate's Name]" or "About Me" page. Other candidates provided similar information on their website homepage that had a similar structure to these dedicated biographical pages. In total, we were able to collect candidate biographies for 1,739 candidates, which represents 94.7% of candidates with a website and 85% of all candidates who ran in congressional primaries in 2022. For each candidate, coders verified whether or not the candidate held an elected position at any point. Because we are focused specifically on how candidates with prior political experience in elected office market their political and non-political backgrounds, we restrict our analysis to the 652 candidates who are "experienced," of which, 630 had a biography page.

In addition to collecting website data, we also collected full occupational histories for each candidate with prior elected experience. In defining what an occupation is, we focus only on jobs held that would be considered either a full-time profession or an elected position to accommodate cases where elected positions are not full-time. This excludes part time or volunteer work that, while important, is not a part of a candidate's occupational background.

To collect these data, we relied on external sources rather than information provided by candidates on their website to ensure the information was not excluded in any way by candidates. We primarily relied on two sources for collecting these data – a candidate's employment history on Ballotpedia.com and personal LinkedIn pages. Both sources were helpful in that they

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[1] For comparison, McDonald et al. (2020) found websites for 83% of candidates in the 2018 primary election.

provided dates of employment for each occupation. This allowed us to verify two things: (1) candidates did not have major gaps in their employment history that would signal missing data for certain occupations that might be advantageous to downplay or hide and (2) the start of candidates' occupation history roughly aligned with when candidates were between the ages of 18 to 24, correlating to the start of most careers. In cases where one of these two checks failed, we verified why this was this case. Certain ones were obvious, such as a doctor having an employment gap while she completed medical school. Others were less obvious, but often we were able to verify the circumstances of why no employment history was present; in most of these cases, these instances were female candidates who had not been employed while raising children and decided to run for office later in life. While we cannot completely rule out the possibility candidates hide their occupational background, we believe these steps mitigate the concerns. We should also note along these lines, over 35% of the occupations we collected data for were not mentioned in a candidate's bio, suggesting we are finding data on candidates they do not want to emphasize. For professional positions, such as lawyers or business owners, this was often north of 50%, again suggesting a large proportion of our occupational data comes from positions candidates do not necessarily want to highlight in their biography. In total, this leaves us with a dataset of 612 experienced candidates where we have a full employment history and biographical statement on their website out of the 652 total experienced candidates that ran in the 2022 primary elections.

This collection of past occupational information provides us with the ability to track pre-congressional careers and also add specificity to how prior occupations affect campaigns and, potentially, legislative outcomes. These data will be useful to scholars interested in numerous questions, including, but not limited to: how particular occupations and careers prepare someone for the job of legislator and whether certain occupational backgrounds lead legislators to focus on particular issue areas, etc.

In deciding how to market themselves to voters on their website, candidates have a lot of flexibility in not only what occupations they mention, but what ones they emphasize or mention first. Take, for example, Democratic incumbent congressman Chris Pappas (NH-1) who was running for reelection. Pappas has a long history as a small business owner, taking over his family's business after graduating from college in 2002. He also served in a variety of elected offices, including the New Hampshire House of Representatives, treasurer for Hillsborough County, on the New Hampshire Executive Council, and then eventually the U.S. Congress. Pappas spends the first four paragraphs of his biography highlighting his congressional experience, legislative accomplishments, and committee work. He goes on to discuss his work as a small business owner and time spent on the Executive Council, but there is no mention of his work as treasurer or of his time in the state house.

Other candidates do everything to hide their elected experience and brand themselves as political outsiders. Republican incumbent congressman Jake Ellzey (TX-6) was a fighter pilot in the U.S. Navy with over 20 years of service. After leaving the military, Ellzey was a consultant and CEO for a firm that worked to hire veterans to share inspirational messages with various companies. He also worked as a commercial airline pilot. He was subsequently appointed by Governor Rick Perry to serve as Commissioner on the Texas Veterans Commission. Ellzey was elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 2020 and then the U.S. House of Representatives in 2021.

Despite these electoral victories and legislative experience, nowhere on his campaign website does he make mention of these occupations. In fact, his biography clearly lists his present occupation as a commercial airline pilot rather than a sitting member of Congress. His homepage reads, "Today, Commander Ellzey is a commercial airline pilot based out of DFW."

Figure 2: Example Campaign Biography Pages from 2022 congressional elections

The above two examples demonstrate the variance in how candidates can market both their political and non-political occupational history. Candidates and their campaigns have complete control over what information to include, as well as what history to put front and center on their biography page. To capture this variance in how candidates present their occupational background, we coded information related to each occupation held by a candidate. For each candidate occupation, we coded the occupation category: (business, doctor/healthcare profession, farmer, journalist, judge (non-elected), lawyer, activist, military, minister, teacher, member of Congress (current or past), other elected office, and government (non-elected), and non-relevant experience), the order of the occupation in a candidate's employment history, and the order in which this occupation appeared in a candidate's biography. For those cases in which a candidate did not mention a specific occupation, we coded that as 0. In total, we collected information on 2,830 unique occupations held by the 612 experienced candidates running in the 2022 primary elections.

Occupational Backgrounds

Here we provide an overview of experienced candidates' occupational backgrounds in the 2022 primaries. In our dataset, candidates on average have 4.6 occupations through their careers before running for office in 2022. For many candidates, this includes multiple experiences in elected office – the average candidate in our dataset has served in 1.9 different elected positions (including Congress for former and current members). To provide a more comprehensive overview of candidates' occupational backgrounds, Figure 3 displays the number of candidates who at some point held an occupation that falls into one of the following categories: business, doctor/healthcare profession, farmer, journalist, judge (non-elected), lawyer, activist, military, minister, teacher, member of Congress (current or past), other elected office, and government (non-elected). These categories roughly follow the occupational categories used by Jacobson (1981) and Porter and Treul (2019).[2]

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[2] For reference, in our dataset there are 313 Democrats and 299 Republicans.
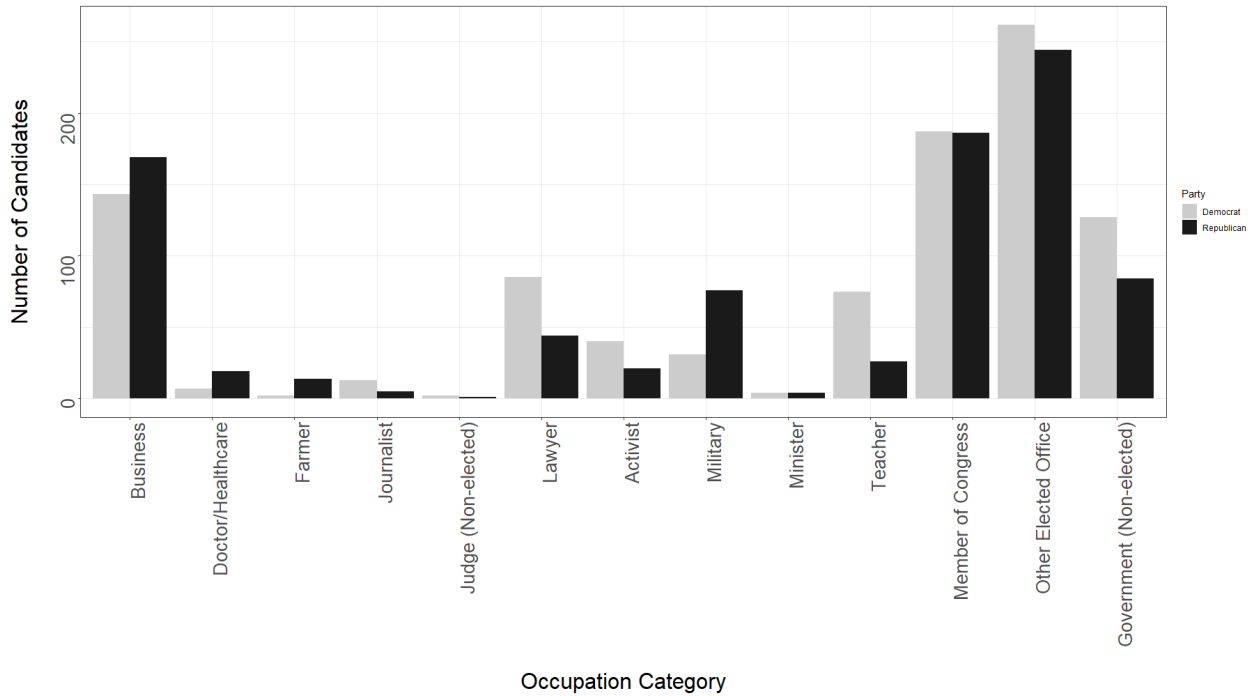
Figure 3: Number of 2022 primary candidates who held occupation by party

Because our dataset of candidates is primarily focused on those with previous elected experience, either in Congress or lower levels of government, the majority of candidates have held a lower elected office (excluding Congress) – specifically 262 (81%) Democratic candidates and 245 (79%) Republican candidates. Another 187 Democrats and 186 Republicans have previously served in Congress, either as current incumbents or in a previous Congress. Among non-elected positions, we find the highest percentage of candidates have experience in business, either as a small business owner or in a high-level position for a corporation. This occupation is much more common among Republican candidates (169) than Democratic candidates (143), which is consistent with other literature on the occupational backgrounds of candidates (Porter and Treul 2019, Carnes and Hansen 2022, Treul and Hansen 2023). A large proportion of candidates also have governmental experience in a non-elected role, often times as an early career staffer, with 127 Democratic candidates having held this occupation and 84 Republican candidates. Consistent with Bonica (2020) we also find a non-trivial number of our candidates come from a legal background, with 85 Democrats and 44 Republicans having worked as a lawyer at some point in their careers. On the Republican side, we also find 78 candidates having a military background with just 31 candidates having a military background on the Democratic side.

In addition to looking at general occupational backgrounds of candidates, our dataset also allows us to explore the career progression of candidates and see what are typical career paths for experienced politicians. Figure 4 plots the density of how candidates progress from one occupation category to the next for their four most recent occupations.[3] Occupations listed on the

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[3] Not all candidates have four individual occupations in our dataset. These candidates are placed into the bucket for their first occupation listed and excluded otherwise, which is denoted by the grey bar at the top of the chart.

right represent the current occupation each candidate in our dataset holds, with each row going to the left representing the previous occupation categories. For simplicity, we group occupations with a low of number of observations into an "other" category.[4] In total, looking at the right side of the plot, 341 of the experienced candidates in our dataset are current members of Congress, 194 currently serve in a different elected office, 45 work in business, 14 work in government, and 12 are currently lawyers.
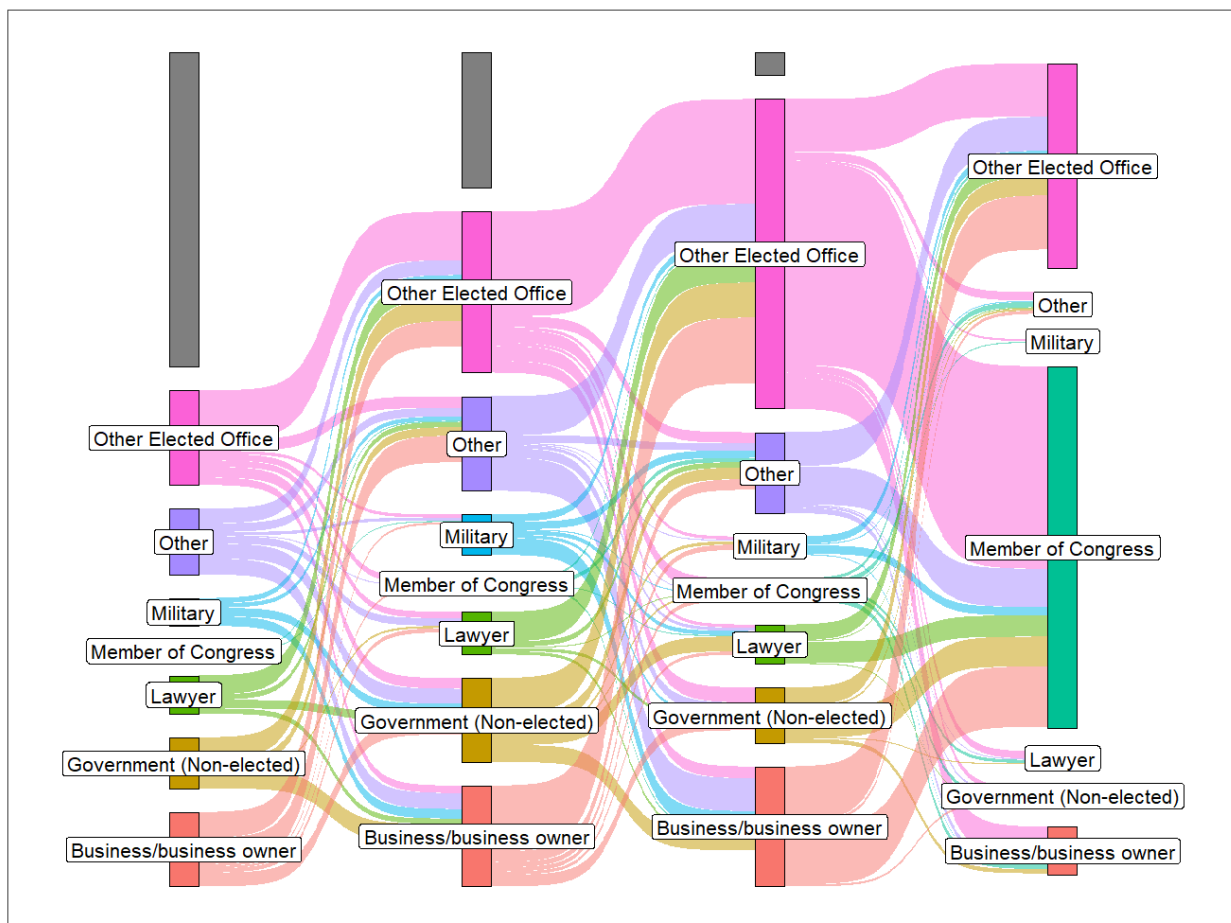
Figure 4: Sankey diagram of the career paths of experienced candidates in the 2022 congressional primary elections

Starting from the right side of the plot, it is evident that the majority of congressional incumbents were elected after serving in a lower level, elected office, depicted by the pink band flowing from the "Other Elected Office" category to the "Member of Congress" category. In total, this band represents 191 candidates. After that, most current members of Congress in our dataset

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[4] These include activist, doctor/healthcare professional, farmer/rancher, journalist, judge (non-elected), minister, and teacher/educator.

came directly from an occupation in business (57 candidates), government (28 candidates), or the law (20 candidates). Among the 193 candidates running in 2022 who currently hold elected office in a position that is not Congress, 50 candidates progressed to that position from another position in elected office, 51 from a business background, 15 from a position as a lawyer, and 7 from the military.

In addition to looking at the most common occupations before a candidate's current job, we can also look at the most common occupation pairings. In other words, the most common career progressions where a candidate moves from one occupational category to another. In our dataset, the most common progression was from a lower level of elected office to member of Congress (209 instances). There are also partisan differences in this pattern, with 58.4% of Democratic candidates who have served in Congress having held previous elected office immediately before being elected to Congress versus 53.9% of Republican candidates. In most cases, this progression occurred for current incumbents, however, we do have several instances of former members of Congress who went through this progression, lost their seat in a previous election, and ran again. As mentioned previously, it is quite common for candidates to move through various lower levels of elected office (195 instances), consistent with prior work on career progression through lower levels of government before running for Congress. Among many other common progressions, candidates also moved often to elected office from a business occupation (138 instances), non-elected government work (66 instances), and a law background (61 instances). Republican candidates moved from a business occupation to lower levels of elected office slightly more often than Democratic candidates (24.8% versus 17.8% of the time a candidate moved into elected office). Democrats are slightly more likely to have been lawyers (11.4% versus 7.5%) or worked in non-elected government positions (14.0% versus 7.8%) directly before moving into lower levels of elected office. There were also 19 instances of candidates moving to elected office from a military occupation, and 18 instances of candidates moving to elected office from work as an activist.

Occupational Branding

As the previous section has demonstrated, many candidates running for Congress with prior elected experience have diverse occupational backgrounds – this includes both experience in elected office and other government roles, as well as non-government related work. As candidates are putting their campaign together, they have a strategic incentive to decide what occupations they want to highlight, and what ones they want to downplay or exclude all together. In operationalizing what experiences candidates highlight versus downplay, we focus on two empirical measures of candidate behavior in their campaign bios: (1) do candidates mention the occupation in their bio; and (2) what occupation do candidates mention first in their bio?

Descriptively, we can demonstrate that candidates are selective about what occupations they discuss. In our dataset of 612 candidates, we have collected data on 2,830 different occupations candidates held at various points. Across this dataset, 66% of the occupations we found candidates had at any one point in their work history were mentioned in the bios. Similarly, candidates do not always discuss their most recent occupation first (45% of the time, candidates list their most recent occupation first), or their occupations in chronological order (18% of the

time, individual occupations are listed in the correct chronological order). These descriptive patterns provide face validity that our measures are capturing strategic and varied behavior.

To provide more nuance to how candidates discuss certain occupations, Figure 6 plots the percent of times a candidate mentions an occupation in their campaign bio conditional on the candidate having held an occupation in that category.[5] It should be noted that we code a candidate as mentioning an occupation category even if they have held multiple positions in that category but only mention one of these positions. Descriptive trends are similar if conducted at the occupation level.
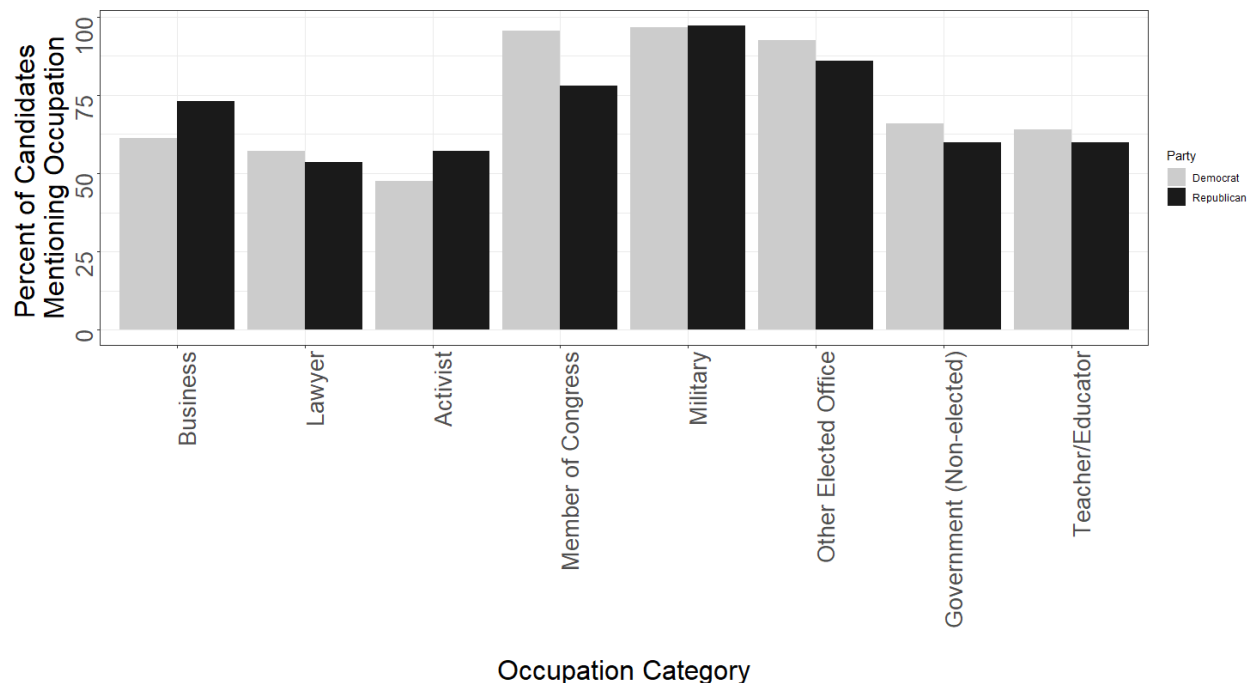
Figure 6: Percent of the time a candidate mentions an occupation s/he currently or previously had on the biography page by party

Most candidates are intentional about mentioning their experience as a member of Congress. Of the 366 former or current members of Congress in our dataset, 87% mention this experience in their campaign bio. However, clear partisan differences emerge, with only 78% of Republicans mentioning this experience and 96% of Democrats (diff = 0.18, p-value < 0.01). A similar pattern exists among other elected experience. Among the 492 candidates who have had an elected office that is not Congress, 89% mention this in their campaign bio. This rate is slightly higher among Democrats (93%) than Republicans (86%), a statistically significant difference (diff = 0.07, p-value < 0.05). In the aggregate, the partisan differences point to Republican candidates viewing the benefit of selling their elected experience as lower than Democrats, even when that experience is in Congress.

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[5] We exclude categories that have fewer than 20 candidates from either party who have held that occupation.

Among non-elected occupations, military experience in one of the occupation most commonly brought up occupations on candidates' bios. For those with past experience in the military, 97% of the time military occupations are mentioned in candidates' bios for both Democrats and Republicans. One of the lower mentioned occupations is being a lawyer. For the 127 candidates who have held this occupation, Democrats mention past experience as a lawyer 57% of the time while Republicans mention it slightly less often at 53%, although this difference is not statistically significant. Despite the fact that law careers are common among those elected to lower levels of office and Congress, candidates with elected experience are not keen on highlighting this experience. In addition, we find clear partisan differences in mentioning occupation backgrounds when it comes to business related occupations: Republican candidates who have previously had business experience mention it 73% of the time while Democrats only mention it 61% (diff = 0.12, p-value < 0.05).

Our results regarding how candidates sell their experience are consistent with prior work on voters' preferences in primary elections for candidates with certain backgrounds. Kirkland and Coppock (2018) find that Democratic voters prefer political experience and Republican voters prefer non-political experience, especially business experience. If candidates are maximizing their chances and highlighting the occupational backgrounds that are most appealing to voters, it follows that Democrats are more likely to mention politically relevant occupations while Republicans are more likely to mention other occupations.

We next explore what past occupations candidates are mentioning first on their biography pages. As discussed previously, candidates have discretion over what experiences they want to emphasize first. Figure 7 plots the percent of candidates who mention an occupation first in their campaign biography conditional on the candidate having held an occupation in that category. The trends in Figure 7 are consistent with those in Figure 6. Democrats continue to emphasize various political experiences – both in and out of elected office – more so than Republicans.
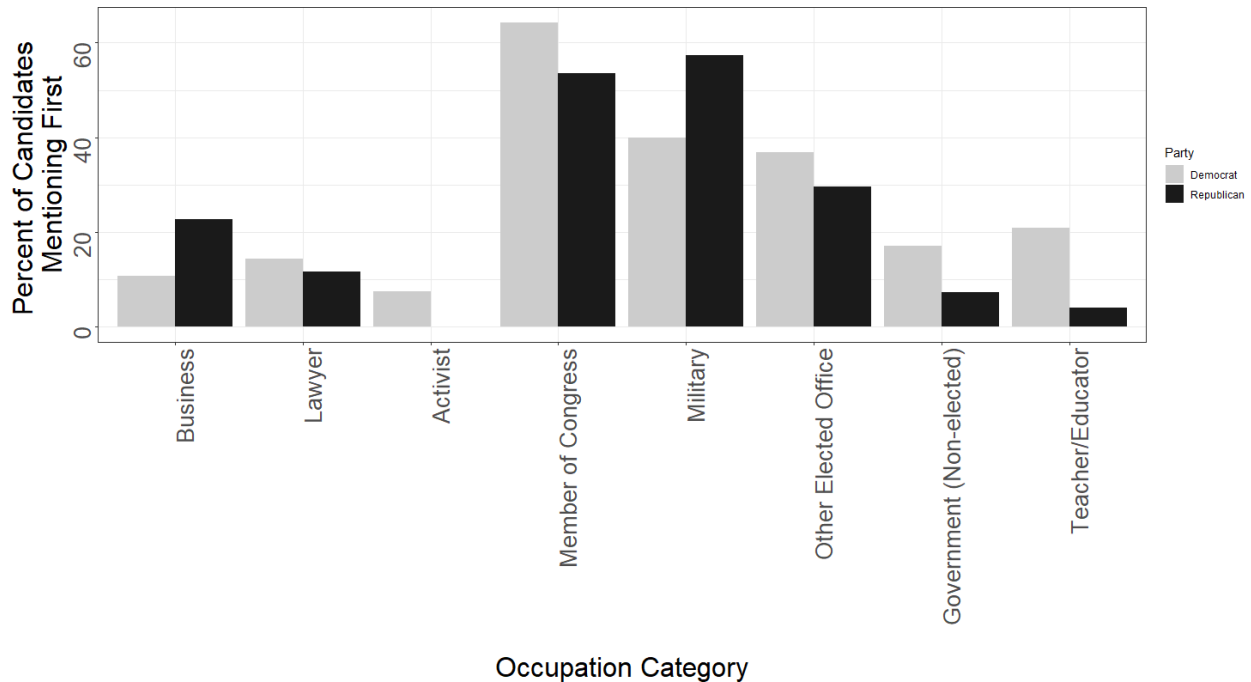
Figure 7: Percent of the time a candidate mentions the occupation first on the biography page, conditioned on having experience in that occupation by party

Among all occupation categories, experience is Congress is mentioned first in candidates' bios the most often, with 59% of former or current members of Congress doing so. This rate is significantly higher among Democrats (64%) than Republicans (54%) however, again signaling the increased importance Democrats place on prior elected experience. The same goes for lower levels of elected office, with 37% of Democrats who have held this position mentioning it in their bio as opposed to 30% of Republicans. We also find similar divergences when it comes to government experience in non-elected positions (17% for Democrats versus 7% for Republicans).

Among non-government positions, military experience is the most often mentioned first, with 52% of candidates who have served mentioning their service. This is consistent with the previous figure where 97% of candidates with a military background highlight it on their bio page. However, while Democrats and Republicans mention military experience at similarly high levels, we find partisan differences when it comes to whether or not it is mentioned first: 57% of Republicans with military experience mention it first as opposed to just 40% of Democrats. We also find that Republicans with business experience are more likely to mention their business experience first (23% for Republicans versus 11% for Democrats). Democrats with experience as a lawyer (14% versus 12%) and experience as a teacher or educator (21% versus 4%) are more likely to mention these experiences than Republicans with the same experience.

The above figures have demonstrated clear partisan differences when it comes to how often candidates mention their elected experience and whether or not they feature it front and center.

However, partisanship is not the only potential explainer of how candidates highlight or downplay their previous experience; we expect race dynamics, such as seat safety, number of challengers (both experienced and inexperienced), and whether or not there is an incumbent, to potentially play a role in what candidates highlight.

To explore how these various factors impact whether or not a candidate mentions elected experience, we estimate three logit models. The results are presented in Table 1. The first model looks at whether or not candidates mention their congressional elected experience (among incumbents or those with past service) while the second model looks at whether or not candidates mention their elected, lower-level experience. For our independent variables, we control for candidate party, whether the candidate faced an experienced challenger in the primary, whether the primary was contested, and the seat safety (measured as same party safe, other party safe, or competitive). We calculate seat safety based on Cook Political Reports' ratings for each congressional race. In addition, we also control for whether or not a race is open in our non-incumbent model.

Across both models, Republicans are less likely to mention elected experience, although the coefficient does not reach statistical significance among non-incumbents (left-hand column). For the model looking at only current and former members of Congress, the effect of being a Republican decreases the likelihood of mentioning congressional experience by 17.1 percentage points.[6] In the aggregate, these results are consistent with the descriptive trends we plotted in Figure 6. Further, we find varying levels of responsiveness to certain race dynamics. Non-incumbents specifically are more likely to mention their elected experience if they are running in a primary election that is safe for their party when compared to competitive districts. This effect results in a 7.3 percentage point increase in the predicted probability of mentioning elected experience relative to a competitive district. We do not find evidence that incumbents are responsive to electoral dynamics, whether it be the composition of other candidates in the race or the seat safety

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[6] Predicted probabilities are calculated using an observed values approach.

Table 1: Predicting Mentions of Elected Experience

	Dependent variable:	
	Mentions Elected Experience	
	Candidates Currently or Previously in Congress	Candidates without Experience in Congress
Republican	-0.181***	-0.028
	(0.035)	(0.023)
Quality Challenger in Primary	0.013	-0.025
	(0.049)	(0.032)
Contested Primary	-0.011	0.015
	(0.038)	(0.047)
Open Seat		0.028
		(0.027)
Seat Safety: Other Party Safe	0.062	0.025
(Reference category: Competitive)	(0.331)	(0.036)
Seat Safety: Same Party Safe	0.029	0.074***
(Reference category: Competitive)	(0.047)	(0.026)
Constant	0.938***	0.930***
	(0.047)	(0.049)
Observations	366	246
Log Likelihood	-109.469	81.056
Akaike Inf. Crit.	230.938	-148.111

Note: * p-value < 0.1, ** p-value < 0.05, *** p-value < 0.01

We now fit similar models, however this time our dependent variable of interest is whether or not the candidate lists elected experience first on the biography. We estimate these models using the same independent variables among candidates with previous/current congressional experience (left column), no previous congressional experience (middle column), and all candidates (right column).

Turning to our results, we again find partisan differences across all three models, with Republican candidates significantly less likely to mention their previously elected experience first. This substantive effect size is again large, with Republicans having a predicted probability of mentioning elected experience first that is 13.0 percentage points lower in the all candidates model. We also find that in what they put first, former and current members of Congress are responsive to district dynamics, with candidates running in same party safe districts more likely

to mention their elected experience first relative to those candidates running in competitive districts. This effect results in a 17-percentage point increase in the probability of mentioning previously elected experience first. Intuitively, this result makes sense – in elections where the general is not competitive, members have an incentive to play up their elected experience to stave off challengers; those in competitive districts may benefit from playing the "outsider" card among cross-partisans and "swing" voters.

Unlike our results focused on mentioning prior elected experience, we do not find evidence that candidates without congressional experience are responsive to election dynamics. While we do see that contested primaries result in more candidates mentioning their election experience first, this number is not statistically significant. We also see, contrary to our results above surrounding incumbents and seat safety, that candidates without congressional experience are less likely to mention their elected experience when running in a primary that is considered safe for the other party.

Turning to our aggregated results looking at all candidates, we do find results that suggest candidates are responsive to election dynamics. First, the presence of a quality challenger in the primary election is associated with candidates being less likely to highlight their elected experience first. This suggests candidates may be responsive and try to differentiate themselves from candidates with similar experience. We also find that contested primaries are associated with candidates being more likely to mention their elected experience first.

Table 2: Predicting Mentioning Elected Experience First

	Dependent variable:		
	Mentions Elected Experience First		
	Candidates Currently or Previously in Congress	Candidates without Congressional Experience	All Candidates
Republican	-0.133**	-0.118*	-0.130***
	(0.052)	(0.065)	(0.039)
Quality Challenger in Primary	0.033	-0.045	-0.081*
	(0.073)	(0.089)	(0.046)
Contested Primary	0.045	0.201	0.092*
	(0.057)	(0.133)	(0.050)
Open Seat		0.013	
		(0.076)	
Seat Safety: Other Party Safe	0.519	-0.143	-0.121
(Reference category: Competitive)	(0.493)	(0.103)	(0.090)
Seat Safety: Same Party Safe	0.170**	-0.005	0.117***
(Reference category: Competitive)	(0.070)	(0.073)	(0.044)
Constant	0.481***	0.458***	0.577***
	(0.070)	(0.140)	(0.052)
Observations	366	246	612
Log Likelihood	-254.459	-174.991	-414.400
Akaike Inf. Crit.	520.917	363.982	840.801

Note: * p-value < 0.1, ** p-value < 0.05, *** p-value < 0.01

Conclusion

Candidates in congressional elections use their campaign websites to tell a narrative about their backgrounds and why their background prepares them for the job of Member of Congress. The website format gives members great autonomy to focus on what past occupational experiences they think best prepare them to serve, and also what backgrounds they think voters will find most appealing.

As documented above, there is great variation in the past occupations and pathways to Congress, though, unsurprisingly, past experience in elective office remains the most common path to Congress. Yet, despite many candidates for Congress having past political experience, not all candidates embrace that part of their occupational history. Here interesting patterns emerge. First, we find that there are clear partisan differences: Democrats, compared to Republicans, are significantly more likely to highlight their past political, elected experience, whether just mentioning it or placing it first on their biography page. This finding is consistent with the notion that candidates want to maximize their electoral chances, and voters from each party have varying preferences over the occupational backgrounds of candidates (see Kirkland and Coppock 2018). This also raises interesting questions about differences among Republican and Democratic voters. The fact that the Republican candidates are less likely to highlight past elected, political experience might suggest Republican voters are particularly interested in anti-establishment outsiders (Lamont et al. 2017).

Second, we find mixed evidence throughout regarding the extent to which candidates respond to varying election dynamics. When it comes to mentioning their prior elected experience, candidates with previous experience in Congress are not responsive to election dynamics. For example, a current incumbent or a candidate who previously served in Congress is not more likely to mention their service even when running against a quality challenger. However, these candidates are more likely to mention their past experience *first* on their biography page when running in a primary that is safe for their own party, as opposed to in a competitive district.

Similarly, candidates without congressional experience are also more likely to mention their elected experience when running in safe districts. Our results point to the notion that experienced and incumbent candidates may not be as responsive to year-to-year election dynamics as would be expected. To some extent, this may not be all that surprising – experienced candidates spend a lot of time building a reputation and are not necessarily able to change that reputation, nor would benefit from doing so, each election cycle. Our work suggests the need for additional research to better understand how candidates market their elected experience, especially as inexperienced candidates continue to succeed in congressional elections.

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