

Evaluating (In)Experience in Congressional Elections

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Abstract

Over the past four decades, nearly three-quarters of freshmen members to the U.S. House of Representatives possessed previous elected experience; only half of new members elected from 2016 to 2020 held prior office. In this paper, 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 experienced candidates are waning. First, we show that inexperienced candidates are increasingly apt to emerge in the same kinds of strategic contests as their experienced counterparts. We then show that experienced candidates have lost their fundraising edge. Finally, we demonstrate that, in tandem with the declining value of elected experience itself, other kinds of identities have taken hold as strong predictors for success. We show that Democrats possessing a non-white or female identity, and Republicans who identify as political “outsiders” are increasingly likely to reach the halls of Congress.

After Elizabeth Esty (D-CT) announced she would not seek reelection in 2018, two women emerged to run in the Democratic primary for Connecticut's 7th hoping to replace her as the district's next representative. Mary Glassman had the kind of political pedigree one would expect from a competitive office-seeker. Glassman had served eight-terms as first selectman (a mayor-like position) for Simsbury, CT and during her tenure the town was named one of the "Top 100 Best Places to Live in America" three consecutive times (Stoller, 2015). Glassman built her campaign narrative around her political background, telling voters that: "We need someone who is ready to work for the people of the district on the first day. We need a candidate with experience, a proven track record of winning...I am that candidate" (Pazniokas, 2018). Having prior elected experience meant that Glassman had ready access to a campaign infrastructure and a long list of potential donors to call on the moment she jumped into the race to replace Esty. These kinds of political connections allowed Glassman to raise an impressive \$100,000 within her campaign's first thirty days.

In contrast, Jahana Hayes had never held, not to mention run for, a seat in public office prior to throwing her hat in the ring for the Democratic nomination in Connecticut's 7th. Hayes had a notable record as an educator—she was recognized as the "National Teacher of the Year" in 2016—but she lacked Glassman's political bona fides. Yet, rather than treating her inexperience as a weakness, Hayes made her newcomer status a cornerstone of her campaign; she implored voters to consider the perspective she would bring to office as a Black woman, additionally noting her background as a teenage mother and someone who had experienced homelessness. Hayes went as far as to tell voters: "My greatest gift to you is my lack of political experience because when I go to Washington I will work for you and for no one else" (Ryser, 2018a).

Theories on congressional candidate success would point to Mary Glassman as the likely primary election victor over Jahana Hayes. Past literature demonstrates that candidates who have previously held public, elected office outperform candidates with no prior experience (e.g., Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 1989). Connecticut's Democratic Party similarly saw value in Glassman's past elected experience and gave her their

backing over Hayes during the state's endorsement convention (Silber, 2018).¹ Even though Hayes lost out on her party's endorsement and was billed by many as a long-shot, she continued to vigorously campaign leading up to the primary. By the end of July—just two months after the endorsement convention—Hayes had raised \$461,000, compared to Glassman's \$457,000 (Ryser, 2018b). On August 14th, Jahana Hayes defied expectations and defeated Mary Glassman to become the Democratic nominee for Connecticut's 7th by a vote margin of 62 to 38 percent.² Hayes went on to win the general election against Republican nominee and former Meridian mayor Manny Santos, making her the first Black Democratic House member elected from Connecticut.³

Jahana Hayes' election to Congress is notable, not only because she lacked elected experience, but because she won her seat by *defeating* opponents who possessed elected experience in both the primary and general election. What's more, Hayes reached Congress via an open seat (i.e., a race with no incumbent running for reelection); candidates with past elected experience tend to emerge most often and win most frequently in open seat contests (Banks and Kiewiet, 1989; Lazarus, 2008). Although Hayes' victory could be dismissed as an anomaly, this upset represents a broader shift in the relationship between political experience and success in congressional elections. We find that today politically *inexperienced* candidates like Hayes are winning seats in Congress at rates not seen since the widespread adoption of primaries. Over the past four decades, nearly three-quarters of newly elected members to the U.S. House of Representatives possessed previous elected experience; only half of freshmen elected from 2016 to 2020 held prior elective office.

In the analyses that follow, we investigate emergence- and success-driven explanations for the declining proportion of experienced officeholders entering the U.S. House.

¹In Connecticut, prior to appearing on a primary ballot, the parties hold endorsement conventions where delegates cast votes for candidates. Delegates to these party conventions are selected by each town committee or caucuses of party members (depending on local party rules) (CGS §§ 9-390 (b) and 9-391). The candidate gaining the most support is given the party endorsement. The endorsed candidate earns the first spot on the ballot and a special designation to signal that they are the party-backed candidate. Any candidate who receives 15 percent of the votes on the first ballot at the endorsement convention qualifies for the primary ballot.

²Although the primary election was billed as a “blow out” in the press, fewer than 10,000 votes separated Hayes from Glassman.

³Also in 2018, Democrat Ayanna Pressley was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in Massachusetts. The 116th Congress had these two black women representing New England in Congress.

To evaluate campaign dynamics across time, 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 House of Representatives between 1980 to 2020 ($N=31,106$). Using these data, we first assess whether rates of candidate emergence have changed in modern elections. If experienced candidates today are running less often, this could explain amateur candidates' recent successes in reaching Congress. We find no evidence, though, of any shifts in experienced candidates' emergence patterns—competitors with an elected background are just as likely to run for Congress today as they were in the past. Instead, we show that candidates *without* political experience have changed their emergence patterns. Modeling district-level candidate counts as a function of time, we find that the number of amateurs running in open seats has doubled from about four candidates in the 1980s to about eight candidates in 2020. Amateur candidate emergence rates have not substantially increased in other kinds of electoral contexts. Interestingly, we go on to identify primaries in open seats as the kind of election where experienced candidates are losing more frequently to amateurs. From the early 1980s to late 2000s, experienced candidates consistently won in over 80% of open seat primaries in which they emerged; in the past decade, however, this win rate has fallen by nearly thirty percentage-points.

In the final section of this paper, we empirically evaluate *why* experienced candidates are losing to amateurs more often today than in the past. Modeling primary election success in open seats as a function of candidate characteristics and district conditions, we find that the advantages traditionally afforded electorally experienced candidates are waning. Experienced candidates have lost their fundraising edge; a growing number of amateurs are now matching or beating the fundraising potential of their experienced counterparts. Furthermore, the personal attributes of successful congressional candidates have changed. The reputation associated with being a public servant has traditionally benefited prior office-holders (Mondak, 1995; Buttice and Stone, 2012). We demonstrate, though, that the experience “bonus” attributed to an elected background has diminished for Democrats and has practically vanished for Republicans. Beyond elective experience,

other kinds of identities have also taken hold as strong predictors for electoral success. In modern elections, female and non-white Democrats are significantly more likely to win open seat primaries than their male and white competitors. Importantly, the vast majority of female and non-white Democrats running in open seat contests today *lack elected experience*. Among Republicans, the majority of recently elected, amateur MCs have no connection to politics—elected or otherwise; instead these political “outsiders” tend to possess occupational backgrounds in business, medicine, or the military.

This article makes several important contributions to the study of elections and representation. Reconsidering long-held theories about candidate success, we demonstrate that the personal and campaign advantages attributed to candidates with elective experience have subsided. This shift away from political experience may be unsurprising to some. Our findings align with well-documented trends within American and comparative politics towards growing public dissatisfaction with politicians and anti-establishment sentiment among voters (e.g., Carreras 2012; Rooduijn et al. 2016; Uscinski et al. 2021; Santucci and Dyck 2022; Hansen and Treul 2021). In certain respects, what we find here indicates that the same environment that fueled the successful party nomination of President Trump in 2016 seems to be playing out at the congressional level. Our findings also offer support for theories on the centrality of identity politics to modern elections (e.g., Sides et al. 2018). 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 (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016). We show a similar preference among Republicans for candidates that possess certain social identities. However, instead of identities rooted in descriptive characteristics, we find that Republican voters tend to favor “outsider” candidates who lack a background in politics.

Lastly, this article raises questions about the cost and benefits of electing political amateurs to Congress. Having new voices in government is important, especially if these perspectives belong to people from groups traditionally underrepresented in lawmaking.

These new voices could help increase representational diversity in a chamber that skews heavily towards elderly, 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. Governing a country as large as the United States is non-trivial and the policy environment is extraordinarily complex. Having a large number of legislative neophytes in the chamber may lead to the passage of ineffective legislation rife with contradiction and error. Similarly, amateur legislators might not have the institutional knowledge to fight adequately for constituents on preferred policy. 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.

The Benefits of Prior Elected Experience

Scholars have long known incumbency to be the number one predictor of candidate success. For the last two decades, incumbent reelection rates have exceeded 90% in all but the year 2010, when the reelection rate was 85%. Recognizing this, a voluminous literature developed to measure and understand the reasons for the incumbency advantage (Erikson, 1971; Mayhew, 1974; Fiorina, 1977; Ferejohn, 1977; Carson et al., 2007). Initially, scholars attributed the incumbency advantage to institutional features such as advertising (Cover and Brumberg, 1982), legislative casework (Fiorina, 1977), and redistricting (Erikson, 1972; Cover, 1977). Other work suggests it results from a member's home style (Fenno, 1978), strategic entry and exit decisions (Cox and Katz, 1996), fundraising advantages (Abramowitz, 1991), and the personal vote (Carson et al., 2007; Cain et al., 1987). In short, the experience of holding office clearly matters to electoral success.

It follows that, for non-incumbents, the principal predictor for electoral success also ties to elective experience (Jacobson, 1989). Candidates with a prior elected background—who we refer to as “experienced” candidates—enjoy some of the same benefits that contribute to the incumbency advantage. Having run a successful campaign before, experienced candidates know what it takes to win an election. Existing research on candidates with prior elected experience has identified several key attributes that contribute to these

politicians' success: they are adept at choosing when to seek office (Jacobson and Kernell, 1983; Jacobson, 1989; Cox and Katz, 1996); they are strong campaign fundraisers (Abramowitz, 1991; Box-Steffensmeier, 1996); and they benefit from the reputation of being a public servant (Mondak, 1995; Buttice and Stone, 2012).

Candidate Emergence

Previous literature on candidate emergence formalizes ambition theory (Schlesinger, 1966) as a rational choice framework by which potential candidates weigh the costs of running against the benefits they would receive should they win office (Black, 1972; Rohde, 1979; Jacobson and Kernell, 1983). These studies tend to focus on circumstances that would favor an entry decision, such as a candidate's subjection to term limits (Maestas et al., 2006), and shared partisanship between a candidate and the district (Lazarus, 2008). These circumstantial factors are critical to knowing whether a seat is winnable and whether the benefits of winning the seat are worth it. Jacobson (1989) identifies candidates with past elected experience as especially strategic in their emergence decisions, choosing to run when their likelihood of electoral success is maximized and the costs of running are minimized. Bianco (1984) identifies open seats—districts without a running incumbent—as the kind of contest that should maximize an experienced candidate's probability of reaching Congress. Indeed, the vast majority of newly elected MCs each year enter Congress via open seats.

Canon (1990) moves beyond analyzing officeholders to explore amateur candidates' emergence calculus. For Canon (1990), there are "systematic differences in many amateurs' utility functions and in their costs and benefits of running when compared to those of their experienced counterparts" (34). In other words, while experienced candidates see running for office as a part of a career investment, amateurs may be less concerned about a career in politics and more focused on a variety of other goals. Some run simply to draw attention to a particular issue or policy (Canon, 1990; Orman, 1985; Maisel, 1986), others are clearly "hopeless" (Canon, 1990), and still others are seeking experience for a future bid for office (Canon, 1990, 1993; Roberds and Roberts, 2002). To that end,

an amateur’s decision to run might not be as closely tied to success as it is for experienced politicians. In fact, many amateurs run for office with no intention of winning. For those “ambitious” amateurs who *are* mounting a serious run for office, Banks and Kiewiet (1989) find that these candidates’ electoral odds are maximized by challenging an opposite party *incumbent*. In this electoral context, an amateur’s chance of gaining the party’s nomination—and perhaps even victory in the general election—is better than if she emerged in an open seat packed with electorally experienced opponents.

In summary, scholarship on emergence says that candidates should run for the U.S. Congress when conditions are favorable. For candidates with prior experience in elective office, this has historically meant waiting to emerge in an open seat so that they do not have to compete against an incumbent. For inexperienced candidates, the cost-benefit analysis is murkier. Overall, amateurs are not especially likely to run in open seats because their chances of beating a slate of experienced opponents are no better than their odds of besting an incumbent. However, in today’s changed electoral environment, these emergence patterns may no longer hold and, therefore, warrant reexamination. Are experienced candidates still emerging at the same rate and in similar race conditions as in the past? Have changes in experienced candidates’ emergence patterns affected the emergence—and also success—of amateur candidates?

Campaign Fundraising

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., Krasno and Green 1988; Biersack et al. 1993; Leal 2003; Bonica 2017). Among non-incumbents, 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 pre-existing networks of potential donors (Squire and Wright, 1990); having run for office before, these candidates do not

have to build their campaign from scratch (Cain, 2013).

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 (Albert et al., 2015) 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 into for fundraising—raise similar amounts of campaign contributions as candidates with prior elected experience.

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 substantial fundraising advantage. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* (2010) decision reversed financial restrictions placed on corporations and outside groups, which fundamentally increased the amount of money flowing into politics and padded amateur candidates' campaign coffers (Rauch and La Raja, 2017). 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 (Cain, 2013). 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 (2022) 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.

Public Service & Reputation

Voters prefer candidates who possess traits like honesty, integrity, experience, and competence; they view politicians who possess these attributes as higher-quality potential representatives (Mondak, 1995; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Stone et al., 2010; Buttice

and Stone, 2012). 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 (Page, 1978; Fiorina, 1981; Popkin, 1991; Funk, 1997; Hirano and Snyder Jr., 2013, 2019). Cues for candidate quality—like past political experience—are particularly relevant in electoral contexts where partisanship is held constant, like primary elections (Lim and Snyder Jr., 2015; Kirkland and 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 it is 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., 2018; Santucci and Dyck, 2022). Accordingly, we suspect that voter dissatisfaction with Washington and “the establishment” could be opening the door to inexperienced competitors who possess characteristics desirable to voters beyond past elected experience.

Assessing Elected Experience in Modern Elections

Recent congressional election outcomes suggest a need to reevaluate—and potentially update—our theories regarding the effect of past elected experience on 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 the past elected experience for all primary and general election candidates who appeared on the ballot for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980 to 2020 ($N=31,106$).⁴ The list of candidates included in our data was compiled from

⁴We do not collect information on write-ins or candidates who ran outside the regular election cycle.

race summaries produced by American Votes and the Federal Election Commission.

Following the bulk of existing literature, we consider a non-incumbent candidate to be “experienced” if they currently hold or have previously held a seat in public, elected office.⁵ Information about each candidate’s prior elected experience was manually coded from publicly available newspaper articles, campaign websites, and archive records.⁶ The data presented here were compiled independent of other research that has collected information about congressional candidates’ past elected experience; we did benefit, though, from data collections compiled by Pettigrew et al. (2014), Jacobson (2015), and Thompson (2021) in that these sources provided a means for validating our candidate experience coding for certain election years.⁷ In our data, we identified 4,705 candidates out of 26,380 non-incumbent challengers (18%) as having previously held public, elected office.

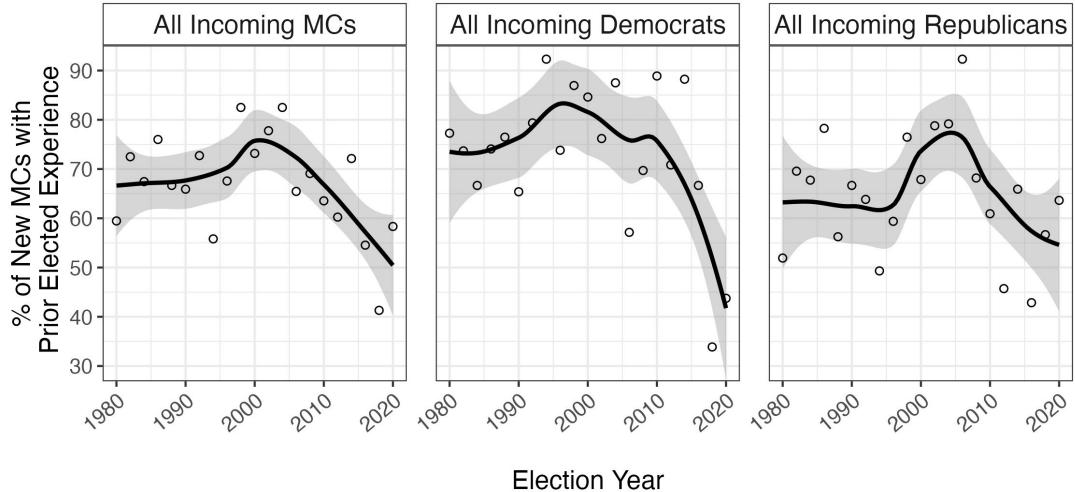
Using these data, we begin by plotting the percent of representatives newly elected to the U.S. House that had elected experience prior to entering Congress. Figure 1 plots the percent of all experienced freshmen MCs (left panel), Democratic experienced freshmen MCs (middle panel), and Republican experienced freshmen MCs (right panel). To visualize trends over time, LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data. Per the left panel of Figure 1, the proportion of freshmen U.S. 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 thirty percentage-point

⁵Another option would be to measure a candidate’s *relevant* experience rather than their *elected* experience. Per Hirano and Snyder Jr. (2019), “to be effective at their job, legislators are expected to have skills such as drafting bills and shepherding them through the committee system, compromising to build broader support for passing bills on the floor, trading favors with fellow legislators, and working with party leaders” (91). 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 of experience in our descriptive analysis to follow produces a similarly stark decline in the proportion of previous legislators reaching Congress in recent years. For reference, see Figure 1 of the Appendix.

⁶For earlier decades in our data (1980s through 1990s), we relied heavily on digitally archived newspapers to discern candidates’ status as possessing elected experience or not. These archives were accessed through a paid subscription to Newspapers.com.

⁷We used these data sources to check our coding of candidate prior elected experience for all general election candidates from 1980-2016 and all primary election candidates from 1980-1988 and 2000-2010. Through validation, we calculated a 96% agreement rate between our data and these other sources. Prior elected experience for all non-matching candidates was re-checked and verified across multiple sources.

Figure 1: Percent of Freshmen Members of the U.S. House of Representatives with Prior Elected Experience, 1980-2020



Note: In plotted yearly percentages, the denominator includes all newly elected, freshmen members of the U.S. 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 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.

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 forty percentage-points, nearly double the decline seen among Republicans.

Building on these findings, our subsequent analyses investigate the causes 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 candidate entry decisions can help to explain amateurs' growing success in reaching Congress.

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 running incumbent). Existing work demonstrates that candidates with elected experience most often emerge in open seats because these races maximize experienced candidates' probability of being elected to Congress (e.g., Bianco 1984; Jacobson 1989; Lazarus 2008). Examinations of emergence patterns among amateurs, on the other hand, have shown that these candidates *are not* especially likely to run in open seats (e.g., Canon 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 (Banks and Kiewiet, 1989). Changing emergence patterns among experienced candidates, though, could alter this dynamic. If experienced candidates today are running less often in open seats or are failing to emerge at all, this would open the door for greater amateur candidate emergence and success in congressional elections.

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 U.S. House district in an election from 1980 to 2020.⁸ 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 a given district.⁹ To place candidate emergence rates in context, we estimate models for elections held in open seats as well as 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 non-linearity in candidate emergence rates across time, we specify election year as a

⁸We exclude elections in states without partisan primary elections because the dynamics of competition in these districts are distinct. Including districts that hold non-partisan primary elections in our analysis produces nearly identical results, which can be found in Figure 2 of the Appendix.

⁹Running models that reflect the partisan count of experienced/amateur candidate emergence produce similar findings and can be found in Figures 3 and 4 of the Appendix.

categorical rather than a continuous variable.¹⁰ 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),¹¹ previous incumbent vote share, and the number of districts in the state. We also specify state-level fixed-effects to account for differences in elective opportunities across states (e.g., term limits at the state-level) that may impact the number of experienced candidates that emerge.

Table 1 presents models for experienced and amateur candidate emergence in both open seats and incumbent-held districts. Note that the table has been truncated for space considerations to include model coefficients for only those elections held over the most recent decade; full model outputs are available in Table A1 of the Appendix. Intuitively, our results indicate that experienced and amateur candidates are less likely to emerge in incumbent-held districts if the incumbent performed well in the election prior. Candidates running in incumbent-held districts are also less likely to emerge if the district incumbent is a Republican. States with a larger number of congressional districts saw modest increases in the number of experienced candidates running in incumbent-held seats as well as amateurs running in open seats.

Turning to election year effects, there is no noteworthy change over the past decade in the number of experienced candidates running in open seats. This findings fits with descriptive trends observed in the data; from 1980 to 2020 over 95% of open seats saw at least one experienced candidate emerge. In recent elections, we *do* note a change in the number of *amateur* candidates running in both incumbent-held districts and open seats. To more directly assess shifts in candidate emergence, Figure 2 plots predicted counts of candidates running in open seats and incumbent-held districts from 1980-2020. The top

¹⁰Specifying year as continuous produces similar results, as shown in Appendix Figure 5. In models where election year is specified as continuous, we include year-level variables that could influence candidate emergence such as presidential approval, percent real household income change, and whether the election was a midterm (see Jacobson 1989). These kinds of year-level variables cannot be included in our main paper models because they are perfectly identified by year fixed-effects.

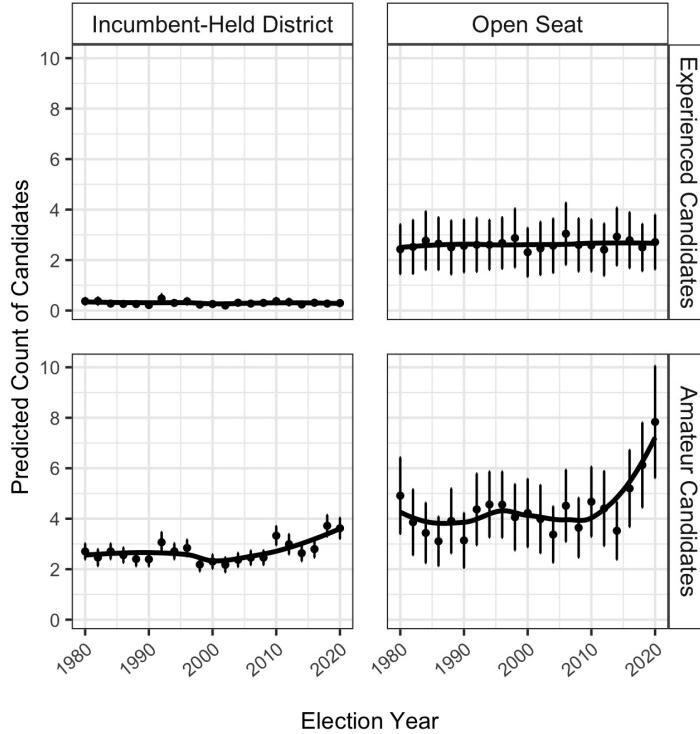
¹¹If the district has no previous incumbent, district partisanship is determined using the district's average presidential vote share for that redistricting cycle. Removing these cases from our analysis produces substantively identical results.

Table 1: Number of Experienced & Amateur Candidates Running in Elections for the U.S. House of Representatives, 1980-2020

	Experienced Candidates (Incumbent-Held)	Experienced Candidates (Open)	Amateur Candidates (Incumbent-Held)	Amateur Candidates (Open)
Incumbent Vote in Election Prior	-3.548* (0.213)	0.259 (0.200)	-0.350* (0.059)	0.037 (0.153)
Partisan Control: Republican	-0.102* (0.044)	-0.001 (0.050)	-0.058* (0.015)	0.011 (0.039)
Number of Congressional Districts	0.014* (0.004)	0.005 (0.005)	0.004 (0.001)	0.013* (0.003)
District Boundaries Redrawn	0.145 (0.127)	0.048 (0.124)	0.005 (0.042)	-0.078 (0.105)
State Primary Election Rules: Open	0.095 (0.334)	0.063 (0.394)	-0.041 (0.118)	-0.415 (0.374)
Election Year (1980-2008)
Election Year: 2010	0.005 (0.122)	0.060 (0.160)	0.208* (0.042)	-0.050 (0.117)
Election Year: 2012	-0.090 (0.176)	-0.006 (0.196)	0.100 (0.061)	-0.109 (0.158)
Election Year: 2014	-0.429* (0.141)	0.187 (0.156)	-0.026 (0.046)	-0.332* (0.134)
Election Year: 2016	-0.178 (0.134)	0.138 (0.161)	0.034 (0.046)	0.057 (0.117)
Election Year: 2018	-0.289* (0.141)	0.028 (0.146)	0.320* (0.043)	0.221* (0.105)
Election Year: 2020	-0.223 (0.132)	0.110 (0.161)	0.292* (0.043)	0.467* (0.110)
Constant	0.869* (0.434)	0.762 (0.473)	1.088* (0.145)	2.121* (0.425)
Fixed Effects: State	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	7,589	742	7,589	742
Log Likelihood	-4,964.885	-1,269.081	-12,549.259	-1,640.700

Note: Results are from Poisson regressions from 1980 to 2020. Standard errors are clustered at the year level. Model includes state fixed-effects. Full model outputs are available in Table A1 of the Appendix.
*p<0.05

Figure 2: Predicted Count for Experienced & 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 U.S. House of Representatives 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 the observed data used to estimate model coefficients in Table 1. LOESS regressions have been fit to the data to visualize time trends.

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). A LOESS regression line is included to visualize time trends. Following expectations, experienced candidates run in open seats more often than in incumbent-held districts. A predicted count of three experienced candidates ran in U.S. House elections for open seats compared to less than one candidate in incumbent-held districts. These emergence differences across district contexts have remained largely unchanged over the past four decades.

The bottom row of plots in Figure 2 depicts amateur candidate emergence in incumbent-held districts (left panel) and open seats (right panel) from 1980-2020. 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, am-

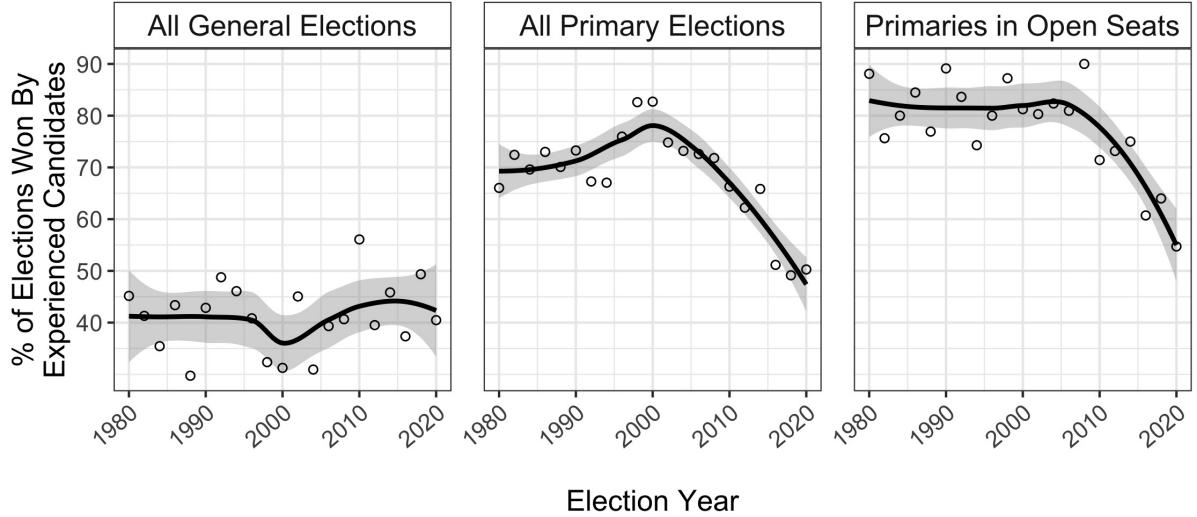
ateur candidate emergence rates across district contexts have diverged. The left panel of Figure 2 illustrates a slight increase in the number of amateurs running in incumbent-held districts for recent elections, from about three candidates to about four candidates. The right panel of Figure 2 depicts 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. It is worth noting that increases in amateur candidate emergence rates have occurred in concert with the rising proportion of amateurs entering Congress, as documented in Figure 1.

A sizable portion of experienced candidates' electoral advantage is attributed to these politicians' judicious emergence decisions. What we demonstrate here is that amateurs are increasingly apt to emerge in the same kinds of races as their experienced counterparts. Our findings also offer no indication that rates of experienced candidate emergence 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, open seats have historically seen modest amateur emergence because these races attract higher numbers of experienced candidates who, at least in the past, have possessed an outsized electoral advantage. 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. To assess if other electoral advantages historically attributed to experienced candidates are also diminishing, we next turn to descriptive and empirical evaluations of experienced candidates' electoral success.

Shifting Dynamics of Candidate Success

Although candidates with prior elected experience are running at the same rates, fewer are reaching Congress. To investigate *why* experienced candidates are losing at higher rates

Figure 3: Percent of Elections Where Candidates with Prior Elected Experience Emerged & Won, 1980-2020



Note: In plotted yearly percentages, the denominator includes all 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 (i.e., no incumbents). 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.

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 twenty-five percent-point decrease over the past two decades in the proportion of primaries where experienced candidates emerged and won.

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 seats primaries, winning about 80% of contests where they emerged. Over the past ten years, however, experienced candidate success rates have plummeted by about thirty percentage-points. In 2020, just over half of open seats where an experienced candidate emerged saw an experienced candidate win. Candidates with elected experience most often emerge in open seats because these races

optimize their probability of being elected. This is particularly true today 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 these strategic contests and are, instead, losing to amateurs who go on to win uncompetitive general elections. 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 2020.¹² In our models, the units of analysis is a candidate who ran in a contested primary election for an open seat.¹³ We exclude candidates running in top-two or blanket primaries.¹⁴ The dependent variable is whether or not a candidate won their 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.¹⁵ 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.

In modeling candidate success, we are especially interested in variables that capture the value of elective experience. Recall, the experience “bonus” attributed to candidates with a prior elected background is a multifaceted advantage. Experienced candidates know how to raise funds (Berkman and Eisenstein, 1999); are adept at choosing when to

¹²Estimating our models with all non-incumbent primary elections (i.e., incumbent-held races as well as open seats) produces substantively similar results. These are available for review in Appendix Table A2.

¹³Uncontested 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.

¹⁴We exclude candidates who ran in elections with top-two or non-partisan 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. These states are included in our analyses for past elections when partisan primaries were held.

¹⁵Election years included in our 1980s model occurred from 1980-1988, election years included in our 1990s model occurred from 1990-1999, election years included in our 2000s model occurred from 2000-2009, and election years included in our 2010s model occurred from 2010-2020.

seek office (Jacobson, 1989); and benefit from the reputation of being a public servant (Hirano and Snyder Jr., 2019). By examining success exclusively in open seats, our analyses hold constant the emergence advantage traditionally attributed to experienced candidates. To capture fundraising ability, we include a predictor in our models for the total amount of campaign contributions (in 2020 dollars, logged) garnered by a candidate prior to their primary election.¹⁶ Lastly, we include a dichotomous indicator for whether or not a candidate has previously held public office. Having controlled for strategic emergence and fundraising ability, this variable should capture the effect that prior public service has on success. In other words, the model coefficient for elected experience should communicate the unique electoral advantage of prior experience itself.

In our models, we additionally control for other candidate characteristics that may influence success, such as gender (male vs. female),¹⁷ race (non-Hispanic white vs. non-white),¹⁸ and ideological extremity as estimated by Bonica (2016). 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), and the number of experienced opponents in the election.

¹⁶Pre-primary fundraising includes totals garnered from individual contributions, political action committees, and personal contributions. Data are collected from candidate's quarterly and pre-election filing reports to the Federal Election Commission. In select cases during the 1980s and 1990s candidates filed mid-year reports that do not clearly align with primary election dates. In these cases, pre-primary fundraising was imputed by dividing the total 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 election.

¹⁷Data on candidate gender was collected for all primary election candidates running from 1980 to 2020. Gender was determined using pronouns found in candidate biographies as well as media coverage of elections. In the few instances where pronoun data was unavailable, gender was determined using exclusively candidate names. These data have been validated using other independently-collected sources for data on candidate gender produced by Bonica (2016) and Hassell (2018).

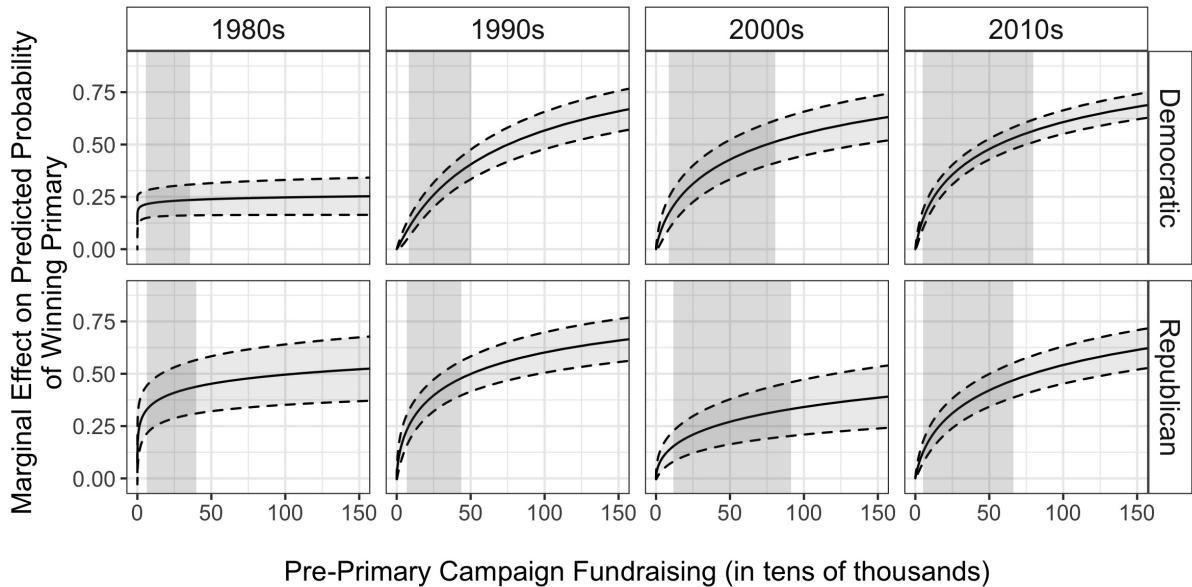
¹⁸Fine-grained data on candidate race and ethnicity were collected, however discretizing individuals into more specific ethnoracial categories produced candidate subsets that were too small to effectively model. To illustrate, from 2000-2009 only twenty-one Republican candidates were identified as racial or ethnic minorities. Data on candidate race was generously provided for primary election candidates running from 2018-2020 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 2000-2006 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 was 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.

Table 2: Candidate Success in Open Seat Primary Elections, 1980-2022

	Republican Candidates					Democratic Candidates				
	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2016-2020	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2016-2020
Prior Elected Experience	0.797*	0.894*	1.160*	0.171	0.178	0.434	1.104*	1.127*	0.567*	0.729*
	(0.286)	(0.221)	(0.241)	(0.191)	(0.252)	(0.278)	(0.262)	(0.340)	(0.263)	(0.356)
Ideological Extremity	0.257	0.671*	0.425	0.436	0.381	1.366*	1.387*	1.176*	0.168	-0.134
	(0.275)	(0.253)	(0.300)	(0.227)	(0.295)	(0.226)	(0.270)	(0.393)	(0.217)	(0.339)
Female	-0.405	0.389	0.182	-0.535*	-0.283	-1.056*	-0.399	-0.105	0.570*	0.666*
	(0.389)	(0.329)	(0.351)	(0.265)	(0.351)	(0.459)	(0.319)	(0.405)	(0.258)	(0.312)
Non-White			-1.081*	0.278	-0.033			0.811	1.156*	0.972*
			(0.772)	(0.340)	(0.401)			(0.437)	(0.327)	(0.400)
Pre-Primary Fundraising (Logged)	0.273*	0.664*	0.564*	0.909*	1.011*	0.070	1.119*	0.898*	1.031*	0.960*
	(0.139)	(0.216)	(0.240)	(0.157)	(0.238)	(0.052)	(0.120)	(0.162)	(0.106)	(0.129)
Other-Party Safe (ref: Competitive)	-0.219	0.823*	1.037*	2.122*	3.408*	0.404*	1.070*	1.413*	2.340*	2.544*
	(0.453)	(0.216)	(0.392)	(0.516)	(0.856)	(0.160)	(0.282)	(0.412)	(0.368)	(0.491)
Same-Party Safe (ref: Competitive)	-0.908*	-0.278*	-0.016	-0.243	-0.399	-0.317	-0.530*	-0.488	-0.182	-0.229
	(0.246)	(0.132)	(0.138)	(0.156)	(0.211)	(0.213)	(0.180)	(0.273)	(0.218)	(0.245)
State Rules: Open Primary	-0.053	0.153	-0.025	0.038	-0.035	0.217	0.259	0.103	-0.056	0.065
	(0.148)	(0.143)	(0.139)	(0.133)	(0.162)	(0.171)	(0.177)	(0.221)	(0.198)	(0.255)
District % Non-White Population			-0.005	-0.003	0.005			-0.005	0.009	0.009
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)			(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)
Experienced Opponents	-0.650*	-0.571*	-0.682*	-0.306*	-0.207*	-0.572*	-0.600*	-0.617*	-0.504*	-0.368*
	(0.105)	(0.089)	(0.094)	(0.071)	(0.102)	(0.089)	(0.083)	(0.137)	(0.078)	(0.113)
Constant	-2.662	-8.982 *	-8.195*	-12.597*	-14.737*	-1.155	-15.612*	-12.613*	-15.103*	-14.632*
	(1.558)	(2.816)	(3.248)	(2.271)	(3.294)	(0.664)	(1.598)	(2.261)	(1.767)	(2.234)
Fixed Effects: Year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	353	570	441	884	481	343	531	354	612	385
Log Likelihood	-195.165	-279.106	-204.902	-350.289	-183.494	-187.881	-223.875	-147.280	-236.799	-146.122

Note: Results are from logistic regressions from 1980 to 2020. Standard errors are clustered at the district and year level. *p<0.05

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 2. Pre-primary fundraising is varied across the observed minimum to maximized value for each decade. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

Model results are presented in Table 2. Several noteworthy findings emerge, especially as it pertains to the association between candidate fundraising, personal characteristics, and electoral success. Each of these components are discussed and explored in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Campaign Fundraising

Turning first to candidate fundraising, Table 2 demonstrates that the magnitude of the association between pre-primary fundraising and electoral success has increased over time and across both parties. To illustrate this further, Figure 4 plots the marginal effect of fundraising on the predicted probability that a candidate wins her primary.¹⁹ For ease of interpretation, logged fundraising has been transformed to real dollars (in tens of thousands) on the x-axis.²⁰ To place candidate fundraising in context across time, shaded areas represent the 25th through 75th percentile of fundraising among candidates

¹⁹For space considerations, plots depicting the marginal effect of fundraising on primary election outcomes for the election subset of 2016-2020 have been omitted. These plots follow trends observed in Figure 4 and can be found in Figure 6 of the Appendix.

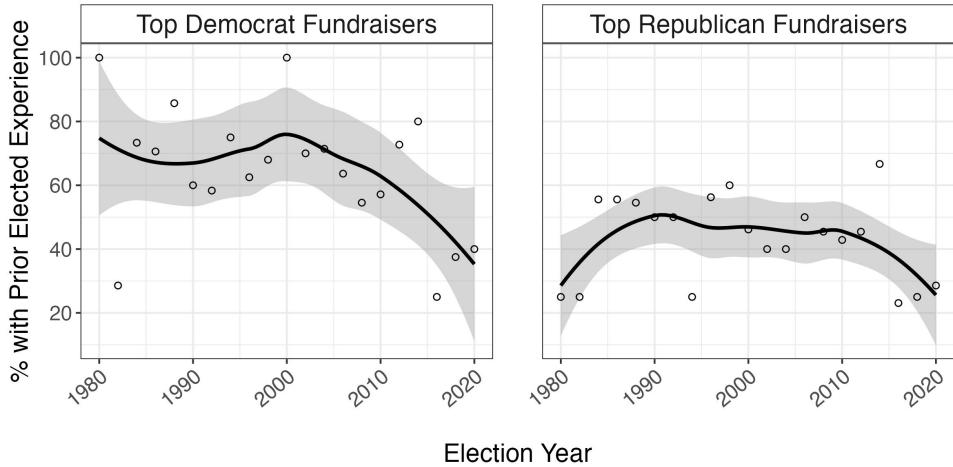
²⁰Plots employing logged total fundraising along the x-axis are presented in Figure 7 of the Appendix.

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 had a 25% 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 had a 50% greater predicted probability of victory. A similar but weaker 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 had a 40% greater predicted probability of primary election victory than did candidates who did not fundraise, holding all else constant. Per the bottom right panel of Figure 4, Republicans running in the 2010s who fell in the 75th percentile of campaign fundraisers had a 55% greater predicted probability of victory. These results align with existing literature finding that the association between fundraising and success has strengthened over time.

Given the increasing electoral benefits associated with fundraising, we next evaluate whether experienced candidates still out-preform 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. We consider a candidate to be a top fundraiser if their pre-primary campaign receipts fell in the top 25% of all candidates running in that decade.²¹ For reference, the marginal effect of fundraising on success for these top fundraisers would fall to the right of the shaded areas for plots in Figure 4. Top fundraising Democrats met or exceeded the following fundraising amounts: \$356,454 (1980s), \$502,835 (1990s), \$804,927 (2000s), and \$797,714 (2010s). Top fundraising Republicans met or exceeded the following fundraising amounts: \$397,350 (1980s), \$437,337 (1990s), \$914,365 (2000s), and \$661,800 (2010s). Plotted proportions are presented in Figure 5. Per the left panel of Figure 5, from the 1980s to early 2010s about 70% of top fundraising Democrats had a prior elected

²¹Replicating this approach such that top fundraisers were considered to be those candidates that met or exceeded the fundraising potential of the top 25th percentile of primary election winners (rather than all fundraising candidates) produces results with the same substantive takeaways. These are presented in Figure 8 of the Appendix.

Figure 5: Percent of Top Fundraisers with Prior Elected Experience, 1980-2020



Note: In plotted yearly 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.

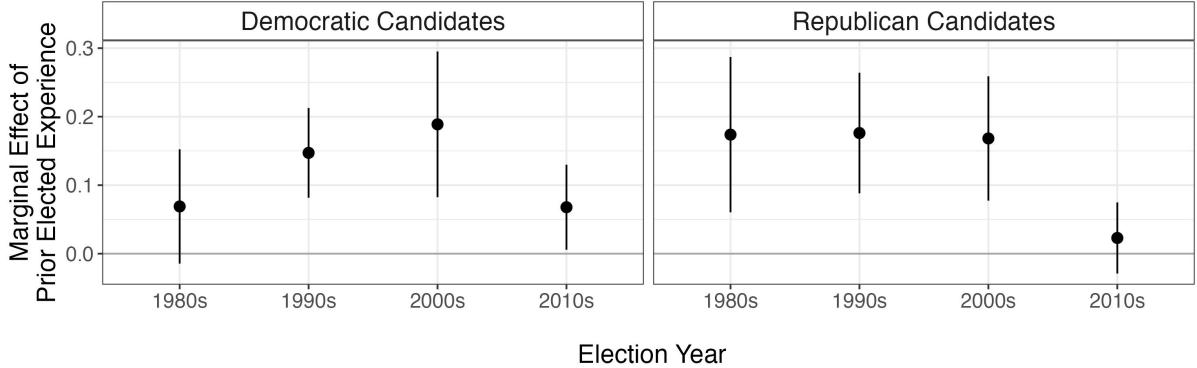
background. Conversely, from 2016 to 2020, less than 35% of top Democratic fundraisers possessed previous elected experience. A similar trend holds for Republicans, presented in the right panel of Figure 5. From the 1980s to early 2010s, about half of top Republican fundraisers had prior elected experience; 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.

Prior Elected Experience

Regression outputs presented in Table 2 demonstrate that, for many decades, past elected experience has served as a consistent, statistically significant predictor for primary election success. In recent elections, however, this relationship has waned. Figure 6 plots the marginal effect of prior elected experience on success in open seat primaries for models present in Table 2.²² During the 1990s through 2000s, Democratic candidates who had held prior elected office were at least 15% more likely to win an open seat primary than

²²For space considerations, plots depicting the marginal effect of prior elected experience on primary election outcomes for the election subset of 2016-2020 have been omitted. These plots follow trends observed in Figure 6 and can be found in Figure 9 of the Appendix.

Figure 6: Marginal Effect of Prior Elected Experience on 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 2. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

their inexperienced counterparts, holding all else equal. For Democrats running over the last decade, the marginal effect of elected experience on primary success has dwindled to about 7%.²³ This attenuating relationship between elected experience and success is even more stark among Republicans. During the 1980s through 2000s, Republican candidates who had held prior elected office were about 18% more likely to win an open seat primary than amateurs, holding all else equal. However, in elections today, there is no statistical relationship between elected experience and success for Republicans.

This shift away from political experience may be unsurprising to some. Our findings align with well-documented trends towards growing discontent with politicians and anti-establishment sentiment among voters (e.g., Carreras 2012; Santucci and Dyck 2022; Uscinski et al. 2021). What we present here, though, does not necessarily demonstrate an electoral preference for amateurs, and investigating such a question presents somewhat of a challenge with available data. As previously discussed, many amateurs who run for Congress have no expectation that they will win and emerge for their own purposes (Canon, 1990, 1993). 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 defeated an experienced opponent in

²³We cannot make any statistical claims here about the decreasing magnitude of marginal effects across time (i.e. whether they are statistically significant or not) because model coefficients for the effect of elected experience on success have been estimated separately by decade.

their primary (e.g. Maestas and Rugeley 2008) but this would, of course, be endogenous for our purposes.²⁴ Moreover, recent work has identified particular *kinds* of amateurs as preferential in modern elections—specifically those without a background in politics (Arnesen et al., 2019; Hansen and Treul, 2021). But not all amateurs are political “outsiders.” Roberds and Roberts (2002) demonstrate that many amateurs possess explicit or implicit ties to politics; they highlight, in particular, non-elected officials and lawyers (see also Bonica 2017). Identifying the political histories for all candidates in our data—especially for those candidates who ran in earlier decades—is simply infeasible.

Instead, we descriptively evaluate the political backgrounds of general election winners. We calculate the percent 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 non-elected, political experience if they have served as a non-elected official (e.g., appointees and party chairpersons) or have had a career explicitly connected to politics or government (e.g., lobbyist, political organizer, or congressional aide).²⁵ We consider candidates who possess no elected or political experience to be “pure” amateurs. To compiled political histories on all newly elected MCs from 1980 to 2020 ($N=1,326$), we relied on member biographies provided by the Office of the Historian for the U.S. 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

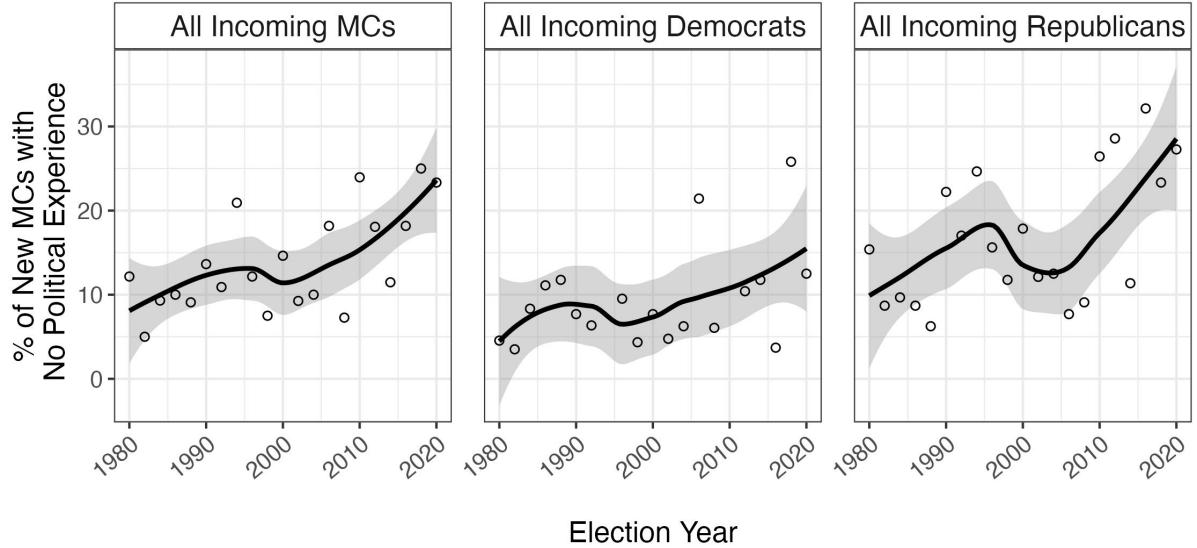
Figure 7 plots the percent of all freshmen MCs (left panel), Democratic freshmen MCs (middle panel), and Republican freshmen MCs (right panel) who entered Congress

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

²⁵A full list of occupational backgrounds included in our coding schema are available in Table A3 of the Appendix. Data are available upon request for the kind of non-elected, political experience possessed by amateurs and the number of years they served in non-elected, political position(s). Following existing literature, we consider lawyers to have an expressly political occupation. Excluding lawyers from our definition of political amateurs produces similar results, available for review in Figure 10 of the Appendix. In our data collection, we also identified whether an amateur had political family ties, for example having a husband who was the district’s previous representative. Including these individual as “political” amateurs produces substantively identical results, available for review in Figure 11 of the Appendix.

²⁶These categories are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 7: Percent of Freshmen Members of the U.S. 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 U.S. 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. Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle.

without elected or political experience. Put differently, this plot depicts the percent of “pure” amateurs elected to Congress across time. To visualize trends, LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data. As shown in the left panel of Figure 7, the percent of new MCs without a political background has increased steadily over time. 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 MC entering Congress were “pure” amateurs. Per the middle and right panels of Figure 7, this increase has been chiefly driven by newly elected Republicans. For Democrats, the percent 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 “pure” amateurs, 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)

²⁷The plotted yearly percentages for the number of amateur MCs without political experience out of all newly elected amateurs can be found in Figure 12 of the Appendix.

propose a formal model which demonstrates that “outsiders” will be especially likely to reach office in periods of intense inter-party 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 (2010) 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.

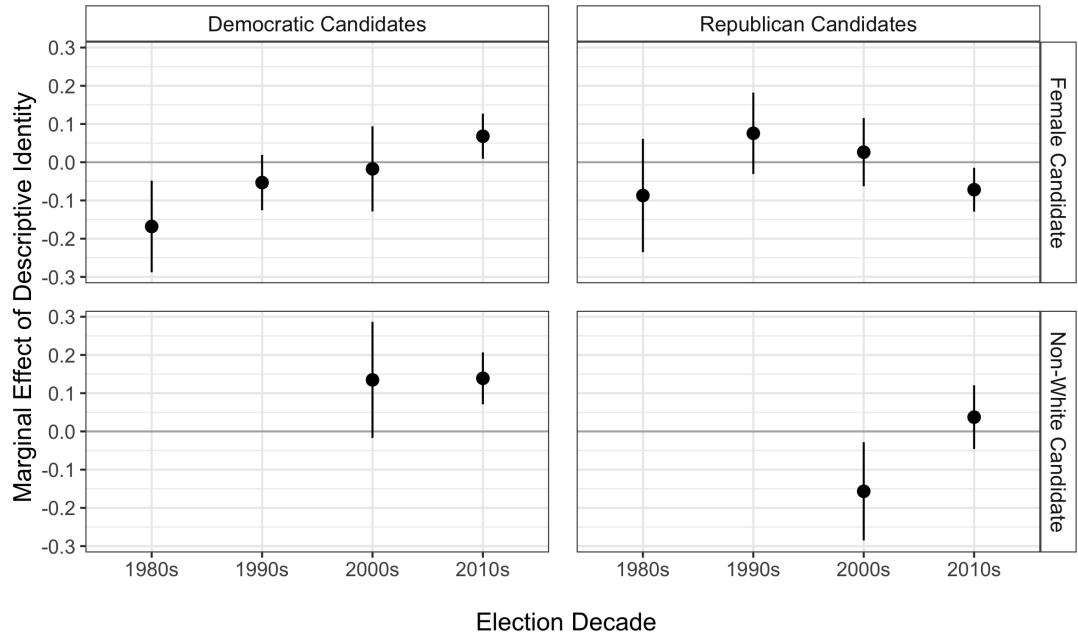
Race, Gender & Political Experience

In the preceding section, we show that a political “outsider” identity may be especially appealing to Republicans in today’s electoral context. This led us to question whether other candidate traits beyond past political experience have become increasingly valuable across time. In Table 2, we identify candidate race and gender as descriptive identities that are today more closely tied to electoral success than they have been in the past, but only for Democrats. To illustrate this, Figure 8 plots the marginal effect of possessing a female or non-white identity on candidates’ predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats.²⁹ The top row of plots in Figure 8 depicts the marginal effect of moving from a male to female identity for Democratic (left column) and Republican (right column) candidates. During the 1980s, possessing a female identity *decreased* a Democrat’s predicted probability of primary election victory by 17%, holding all else equal. Conversely, in the 2010s, possessing a female identity *increased* a Democrat’s probability of primary election victory by nearly 8%. For Republicans, candidates possessing a female identity who ran from the 1980s through the 2000s were not any more likely to win an open seat primary, holding all else equal. In the 2010s, however, possessing a female identity *decreased* a Republican’s probability of primary election victory by about 7%.

²⁸Importantly, anti-establishment orientations are distinct from left-right orientations. See Uscinski et al. (2021) for a review.

²⁹For space considerations, plots depicting the marginal effect of gender and race/ethnicity on primary election outcomes for the election subset of 2016-2020 have been omitted. These plots follow trends observed in Figure 8 and can be found in Figure 13 of the Appendix.

Figure 8: Marginal Effect of Descriptive Identities on Predicted Probability of Winning Open Seat Primary Elections



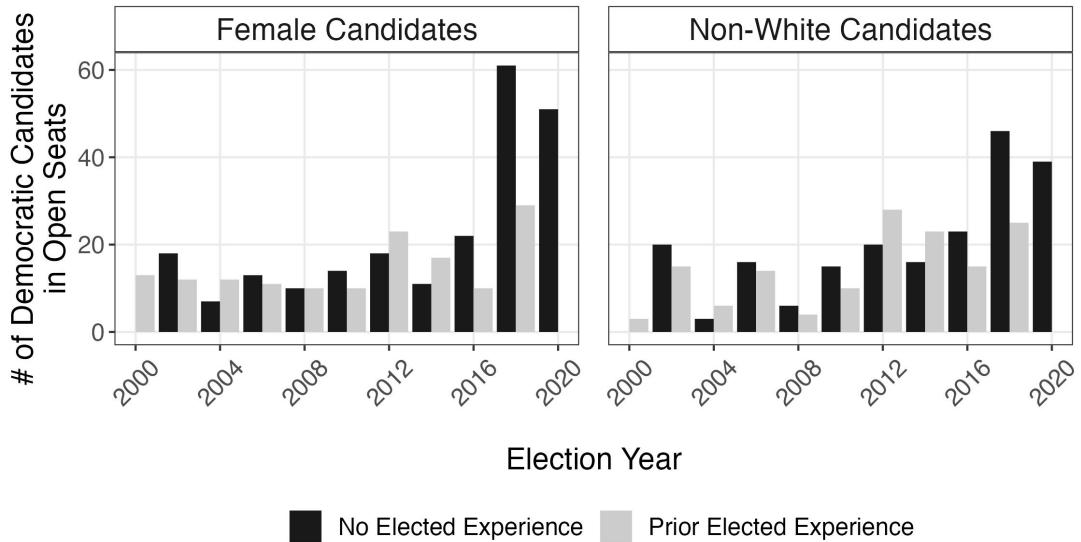
Note: Quantities of interest are marginal effects of female (left panels) and non-white (right panels) identities on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats for Democrats (top panels) and Republicans (bottom panels). Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table 2. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

The bottom row of plots in Figure 8 depicts the marginal effect of moving from a white (non-Hispanic) identity to a non-white identity for Democratic (left column) and Republican (right column) candidates.³⁰ Due to data limitations, candidate racial/ethnic identity was included as a predictor only for those elections held over the last two decades. During the 2000s, possessing a non-white identity had no statistical relationship with a Democrat's predicted probability of primary election victory. Conversely, in the 2010s, possessing a non-white identity *increased* a Democrat's probability of primary election victory by nearly 15%. For Republicans running in the 2000s, possessing a non-white identity *decreased* the predicted probability of primary election victory by about 15%, holding all else equal. In the 2010s, non-white Republicans were not any less likely to win an open seat primary than their white counterparts.

The results presented here align with extant work underscoring the importance of descriptive identities to the Democratic Party (e.g., Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Porter

³⁰For a discussion of our coding of candidate race/ethnic identity, see footnote 18.

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) panel candidates running in vacant seat primaries from 2000 to 2020. Dark bars indicate the number of female/non-white Democrats who had no elected experience before running for Congress. Light bars indicate the number of female/non-white Democrats who possessed elected experience.

et al. Forthcoming). The question remains, though, of how might past political experience intersect with candidate gender and race/ethnicity? A wide body of literature has developed documenting the fact that women and racial minorities feel they must accrue substantial experience before running for elected office (e.g., Lawless and Fox 2012; Lawless 2012). 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. Two 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. Second, this drastic increase in female/non-white candidate emergence among Democrats is principally driven by candidates who *lack* elected experience.

Inexperienced and non-white Democrats are not only running more often, they are 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*.³¹ Similarly, during the

³¹These rates are plotted in the left panel of Figure 14 the Appendix.

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.³²

Conclusion

There is little question that inexperienced candidates are increasingly finding success in today’s congressional elections. This is a major shift in electoral outcomes and is certainly worthy of scholarly attention. The goal of this article is to begin to address why “quality” candidates—those with prior experience in elective office—are less frequently being elected to Congress. We begin by examining candidate emergence decisions, asking whether experienced candidates have changed the types of races they are running in or even if there are simply fewer of them running than in the past. We find that the decline in experienced candidate success is not the result of changing emergence decisions by this type of candidate. That is, experienced candidates still run in open seats just as frequently as they did in the past. When we turn to inexperienced candidates, however, we *do* see more of them entering open seat elections than in the past. Where it used to be the case that congressional elections for open seats (i.e. those without an incumbent on the ballot) were more or less reserved for those experienced challengers who had waited out the tenure of the incumbent, open seat elections are now filled with *more* political novices than experienced candidates.

To further explore whether the electoral advantages attributed to experienced candidates are indeed diminishing, we next evaluated the relationship between candidate characteristics and electoral success. Here we find interesting variation between the two political parties. For Republicans, having past elected experience is no longer the significant predictor of success it once was; rather, the majority of new amateurs elected to Congress today are “outsiders” with no connections to politics—elected or otherwise. For Democrats, prior experience remains a significant predictor, but today possessing a female or non-white identity also elevates a candidate’s likelihood of electoral success. For both parties, past political acumen, while still helpful, is evaluated alongside other

³²These rates are plotted in the right panel of Figure 14 of the Appendix.

identity-based characteristics beyond prior elected experience. Additionally, amateurs have proven themselves to be successful fundraisers. *Citizens United v FEC* (2010) created a new fundraising environment where money flows with little restrictions. We suggest that this new environment, likely coupled with the explosion of social media fundraising, is in part propelling inexperienced candidates to fundraising success not seen previously.

As more and more inexperienced candidates enter the U.S. Congress, it will be important to examine what the consequences of this are, both for the individual members' constituents and for the institution. Future research should explore these questions. Furthermore, additional work continue to further examine the changing fundraising landscape of elections, looking to the ease of raising funds via social media, and voter preferences.

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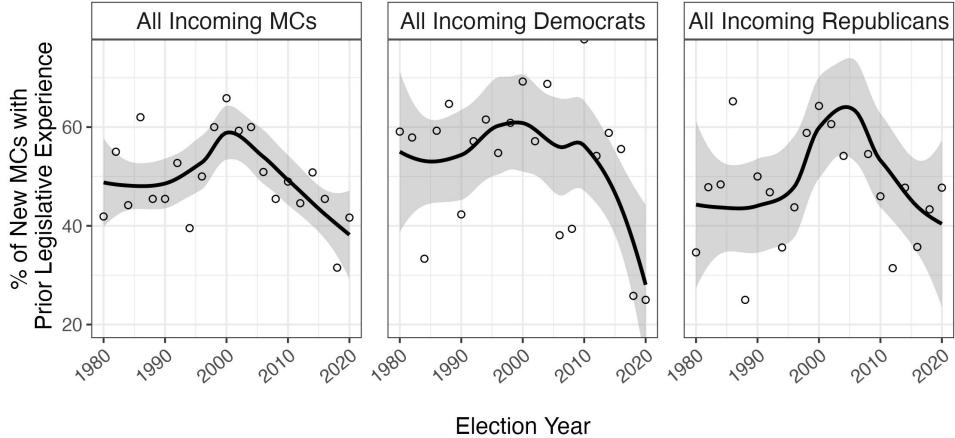
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Evaluating (In)Experience in Congressional Elections

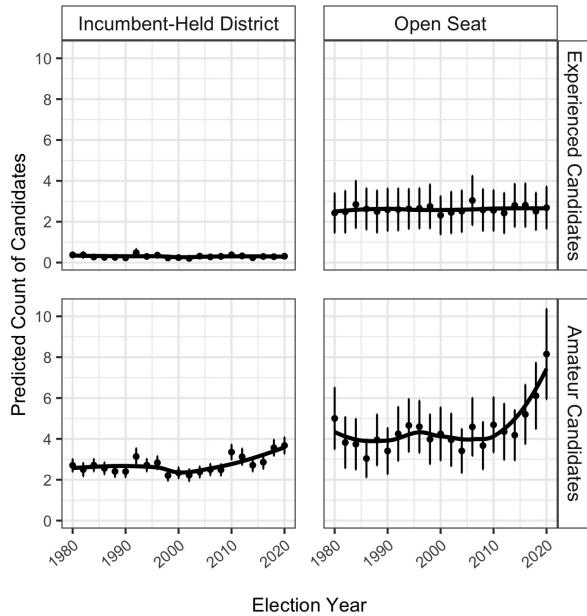
Appendix & Supplementary Information

Figure 1: Percent of Freshmen Members of the U.S. House of Representatives with Prior Legislative Experience, 1980-2020



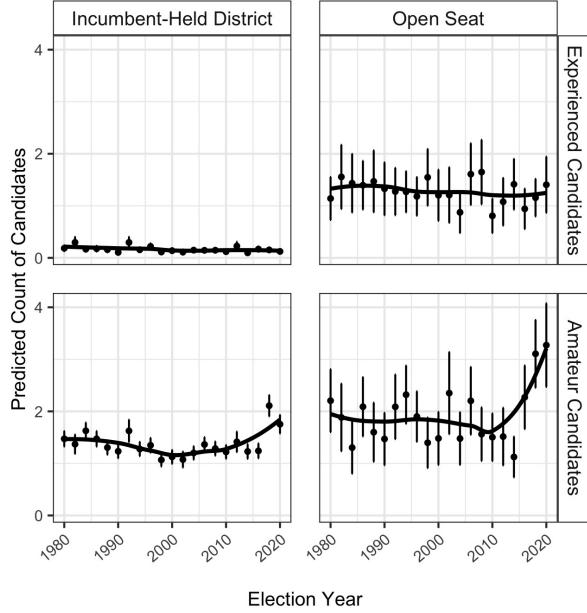
Note: In plotted yearly proportions, the denominator includes all newly elected, freshmen members of the U.S. House of Representatives (i.e., no incumbents) in the left panel, newly elected Democrats in the middle panel, and newly elected Republicans in the right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those newly elected members who have previously held legislative office (i.e., served as state House or state Senate member). Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle.

Figure 2: Predicted Count for Experienced & Amateur Candidate Emergence in Congressional Districts (Including Races with Non-Partisan Primaries)



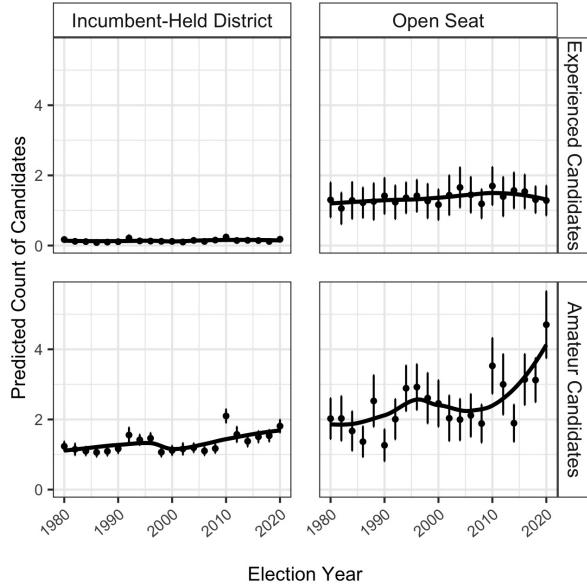
Note: Quantities of interest are predicted counts of the number of candidates with elected experience (top panels) and without elected experience (bottom panels) who emerged to run in incumbent-held districts (left panels) and open seats (right panels) for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980 to 2020. Counts represent the total number of Democratic and Republican candidates who ran in a given congressional district and includes districts which employ non-partisan primaries. Predicted counts are simulated with the observed data and are presented with 95% confidence intervals and a LOESS regression line to visualize time trends.

Figure 3: Predicted Count for Experienced & Amateur Democrats Emergence



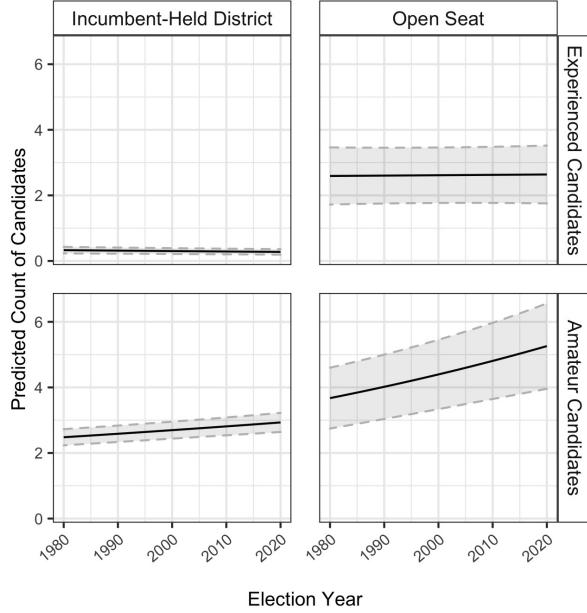
Note: Quantities of interest are predicted counts of the number of Democratic candidates with elected experience (top panels) and without elected experience (bottom panels) who emerged to run in incumbent-held districts (left panels) and open seats (right panels) for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980 to 2020. Counts represent the total number of Democratic candidates who ran in a given congressional district. Predicted counts are simulated with the observed data and are presented with 95% confidence intervals and a LOESS regression line to visualize time trends. State-level fixed effects have been dropped from these analyses due to over-fitting.

Figure 4: Predicted Count for Experienced & Amateur Republicans Emergence



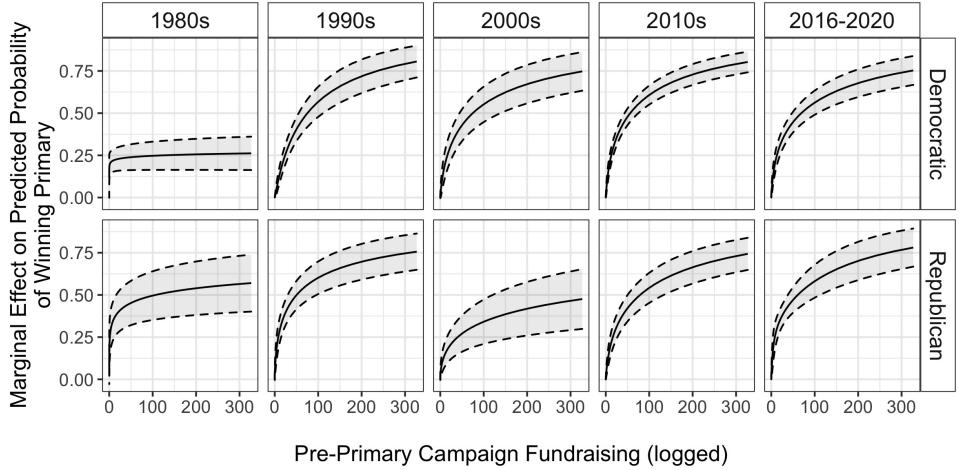
Note: Quantities of interest are predicted counts of the number of Republican candidates with elected experience (top panels) and without elected experience (bottom panels) who emerged to run in incumbent-held districts (left panels) and open seats (right panels) for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980 to 2020. Counts represent the total number of Republican candidates who ran in a given congressional district. Predicted counts are simulated with the observed data and are presented with 95% confidence intervals and a LOESS regression line to visualize time trends. State-level fixed effects have been dropped from these analyses due to over-fitting.

Figure 5: Predicted Count for Experienced & Amateur Candidate Emergence in Congressional Districts as a Function of Linear Time



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 U.S. House of Representatives 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 the observed data and are presented with 95% confidence intervals and a LOESS regression line to visualize time trends.

Figure 6: 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 1. Pre-primary fundraising is varied across the observed minimum to maximum value for each decade. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

Table A1: Number of Experienced and Amateur Candidates Running in Elections for the U.S. House of Representatives, 1980-2020

	Experienced Candidate (Incumbent-Held)	Experienced Candidate (Open)	Amateur Candidate (Incumbent-Held)	Amateur Candidate (Open)
Inc. Vote in Election Prior	-3.548* (0.213)	0.259 (0.200)	-0.350* (0.059)	0.037 (0.153)
Partisan Control: Republican	-0.102* (0.044)	-0.001 (0.050)	-0.058* (0.015)	0.011 (0.039)
# of Congressional Districts	0.014* (0.004)	0.005 (0.005)	0.004 (0.001)	0.013* (0.003)
District Boundaries Redrawn	0.145 (0.127)	0.048 (0.124)	0.005 (0.042)	-0.078 (0.105)
Primary Election Rules: Open	0.095 (0.334)	0.063 (0.394)	-0.041 (0.118)	-0.415 (0.374)
Election Year: 1982	0.023 (0.173)	0.038 (0.194)	-0.094 (0.062)	-0.241 (0.159)
Election Year 1984	-0.291* (0.133)	0.131 (0.175)	0.001 (0.045)	-0.357* (0.150)
Election Year: 1986	-0.342* (0.137)	0.088 (0.158)	-0.056 (0.045)	-0.458* (0.129)
Election Year: 1988	-0.361* (0.139)	0.029 (0.177)	-0.118* (0.045)	-0.228 (0.135)
Election Year: 1990	-0.524* (0.149)	0.053 (0.164)	-0.122* (0.045)	-0.448* (0.144)
Election Year: 1992	0.256 (0.169)	0.071 (0.188)	0.126* (0.060)	-0.117 (0.153)
Election Year: 1994	-0.197 (0.127)	0.070 (0.152)	0.002 (0.044)	-0.074 (0.111)
Election Year: 1996	-0.008 (0.124)	0.097 (0.150)	0.050 (0.044)	-0.075 (0.112)
Election Year: 1998	-0.458* (0.139)	0.168 (0.164)	-0.213* (0.048)	-0.191 (0.132)
Election Year: 2000	-0.356* (0.141)	-0.051 (0.171)	-0.161* (0.048)	-0.151 (0.129)

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Table A1: Number of Experienced and Amateur Candidates Running in Elections for the U.S. House of Representatives, 1980-2020 (cont.)

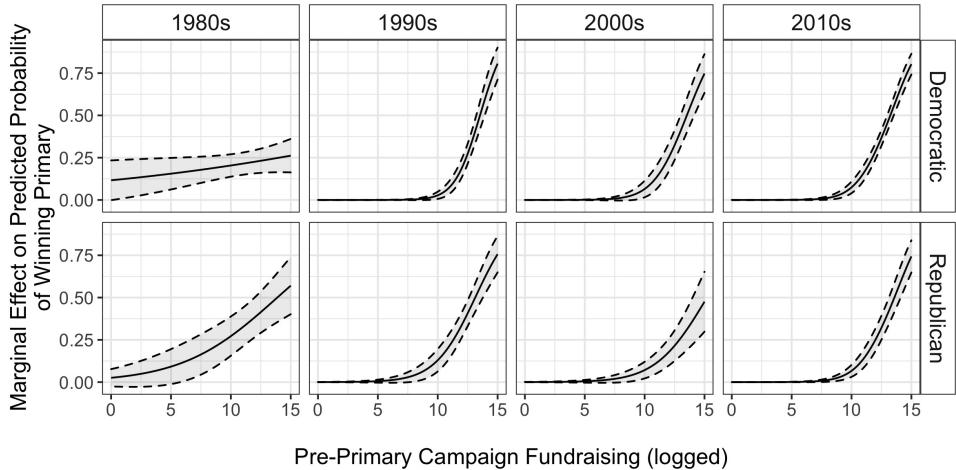
	Experienced Candidate		Amateur Candidate	
	(Incumbent-Held)	(Open)	(Incumbent-Held)	(Open)
Election Year: 2002	-0.607* (0.190)	0.014 (0.197)	-0.218* (0.062)	-0.209 (0.160)
Election Year: 2004	-0.178 (0.130)	0.056 (0.174)	-0.132* (0.045)	-0.376* (0.138)
Election Year: 2006	-0.290* (0.134)	0.226 (0.162)	-0.097* (0.044)	-0.085 (0.128)
Election Year: 2008	-0.192 (0.129)	0.069 (0.165)	-0.096* (0.045)	-0.299* (0.134)
Election Year: 2010	0.005 (0.122)	0.060 (0.160)	0.208* (0.042)	-0.050 (0.117)
Election Year: 2012	-0.090 (0.176)	-0.006 (0.196)	0.100 (0.061)	-0.109 (0.158)
Election Year: 2014	-0.429* (0.141)	0.187 (0.156)	-0.026 (0.046)	-0.332* (0.134)
Election Year: 2016	-0.178 (0.134)	0.138 (0.161)	0.034 (0.046)	0.057 (0.117)
Election Year: 2018	-0.289* (0.141)	0.028 (0.146)	0.320* (0.043)	0.221* (0.105)
Election Year: 2020	-0.223 (0.132)	0.110 (0.161)	0.292* (0.043)	0.467* (0.110)
Fixed Effects: State	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	7,589	742	7,589	742
Log Likelihood	-4,964.9	-1,269.1	-12,549.3	-1,640.7

Table A2: Candidate Success in Non-Incumbent Seat Primary Elections, 1980-2022

	Republican Candidates					Democratic Candidates				
	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2016-2020	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2016-2020
Prior Elected Experience	0.514* (0.242)	0.698* (0.201)	1.418* (0.289)	0.496* (0.181)	0.234 (0.249)	0.423 (0.217)	1.252* (0.211)	1.102* (0.259)	0.485* (0.244)	0.797* (0.345)
Ideological Extremity	0.002 (0.195)	1.192* (0.293)	0.277 (0.390)	0.402* (0.162)	0.448* (0.227)	1.295* (0.214)	1.319* (0.233)	0.536 (0.287)	0.440* (0.219)	0.229 (0.283)
Female	-1.090* (0.504)	0.161 (0.308)	0.211 (0.415)	-0.316 (0.250)	-0.370 (0.328)	-0.193 (0.368)	-0.132 (0.282)	0.208 (0.372)	0.638* (0.258)	0.733* (0.319)
Pre-Primary Fundraising (Logged)	0.014 (0.058)	0.860* (0.208)	0.620 (0.400)	1.072* (0.141)	1.077* (0.246)	0.168* (0.085)	0.246 (0.179)	0.486* (0.215)	0.909* (0.103)	0.983* (0.129)
Other-Party Safe (ref: Competitive)	-0.867 (0.593)	0.649* (0.232)	1.333* (0.473)	1.860* (0.449)	2.971* (0.806)	0.427* (0.153)	0.633* (0.272)	0.539 (0.360)	1.535* (0.310)	2.031* (0.460)
Same-Party Safe (ref: Competitive)	-1.004* (0.275)	-0.267 (0.182)	-0.025 (0.165)	-0.430* (0.159)	-0.438* (0.208)	-0.481 (0.259)	-0.569* (0.168)	-0.389* (0.198)	-0.019 (0.222)	-0.196 (0.298)
State Rules: Open Primary	0.002 (0.189)	0.113 (0.160)	-0.201 (0.186)	0.079 (0.137)	-0.172 (0.195)	0.502* (0.198)	0.396* (0.133)	0.629* (0.218)	0.339 (0.197)	0.571* (0.291)
Experienced Opponents	-0.352* (0.120)	-0.326* (0.097)	-0.480* (0.112)	-0.212* (0.078)	-0.247 (0.132)	-0.453* (0.104)	-0.387* (0.076)	-0.574* (0.135)	-0.456* (0.091)	-0.374* (0.150)
Constant	0.747 (0.682)	-12.401* (2.706)	-9.637 (5.673)	-15.233* (1.929)	-14.986* (3.460)	-2.711* (0.969)	-4.969* (2.257)	-7.284* (2.891)	-12.876* (1.482)	-14.665* (1.962)
Fixed Effects: Year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	348	628	357	1,068	523	425	575	376	634	386
Log Likelihood	-199.883	-279.428	-152.137	-385.243	-191.917	-237.224	-267.217	-165.392	-234.803	-134.874

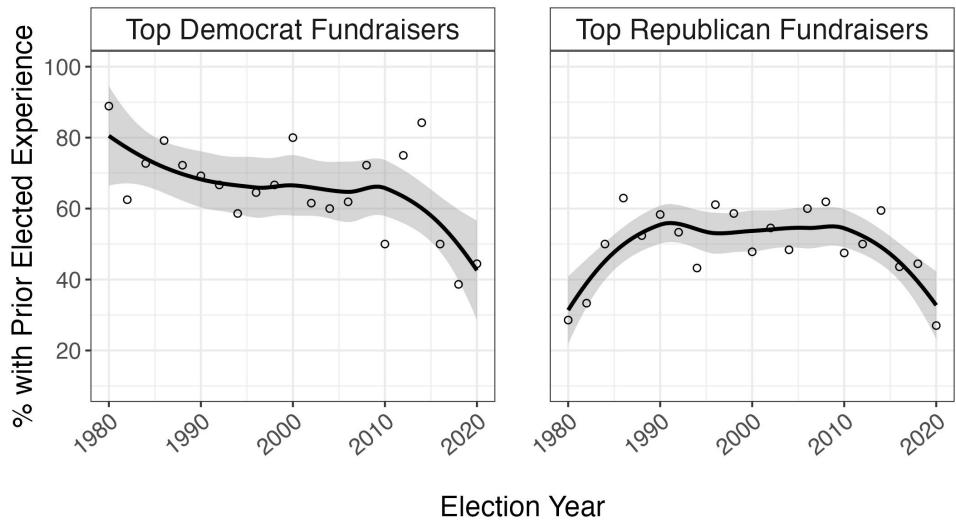
Note: Results are from logistic regressions from 1980 to 2020. Standard errors are clustered at the district and year level. Candidate race is omitted due to lack of coverage in our manual collection of candidate race and ethnicity. *p<0.05

Figure 7: Marginal Effect of Pre-Primary Fundraising (Logged) on the Predicted Probability of Winning Open Seat Primary Elections



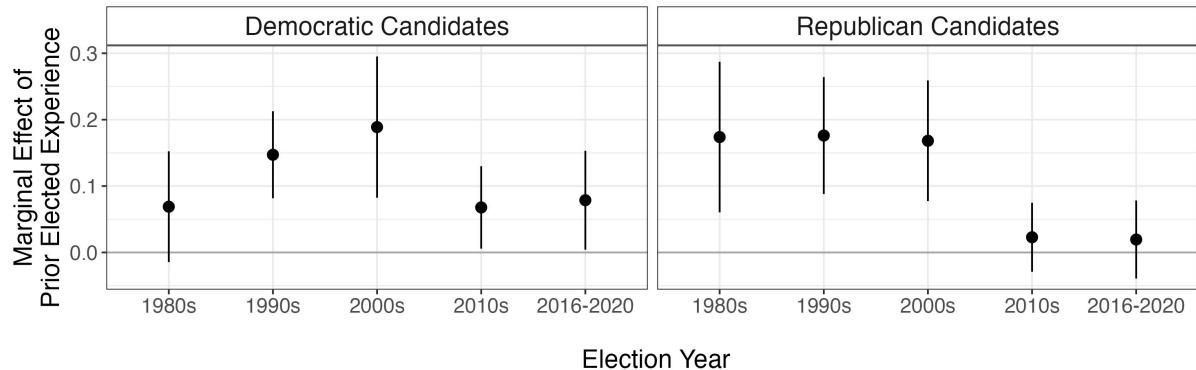
Note: Quantities of interest are marginal effects of pre-primary fundraising on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats. Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table 1. Pre-primary fundraising is varied across the observed minimum to maximized value for each decade. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 8: Percent of Top Fundraisers with Prior Elected Experience, 1980-2020



Note: In plotted yearly proportions, the denominator includes all top fundraising Democratic (left) and Republican (right) candidates who ran in open seat primary elections. The numerator in each panel includes the number of those candidates who previously held public, elected office. LOESS regressions with 95% confidence intervals have been fit to the data to visualize time trends. Here we define top fundraisers as candidates who met or exceeded the fundraising potential of the top 25% of primary election winners. Top fundraising Democrats met or exceeded the following fundraising amounts: \$510,351 (1980s), \$734,676 (1990s), \$1,437,529 (2000s), and \$1,413,037 (2010s). Top fundraising Republicans met or exceeded the following fundraising amounts: \$651,896 (1980s), \$639,130 (1990s), \$1,274,113(2000s), and \$1,261,635 (2010s).

Figure 9: Marginal Effect of Prior Elected Experienced on Predicted Probability of Winning Open Seat Primary Elections

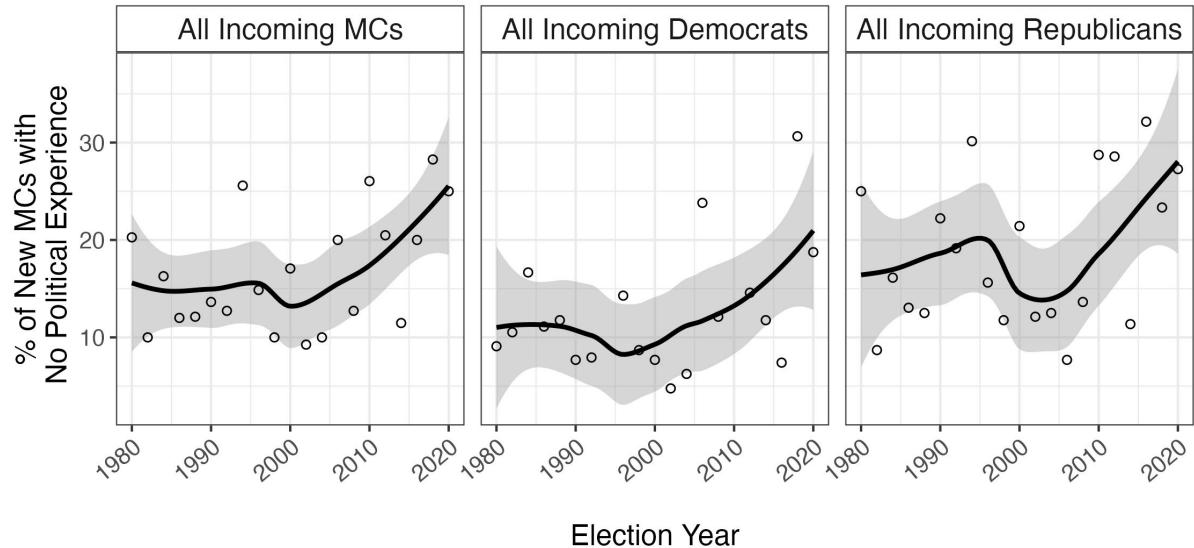


Note: Quantities of interest are marginal effects of possessing past elected experience on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats. Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table 2. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

Table A3: Prior Occupational Backgrounds of Candidates Coded with Political Experience

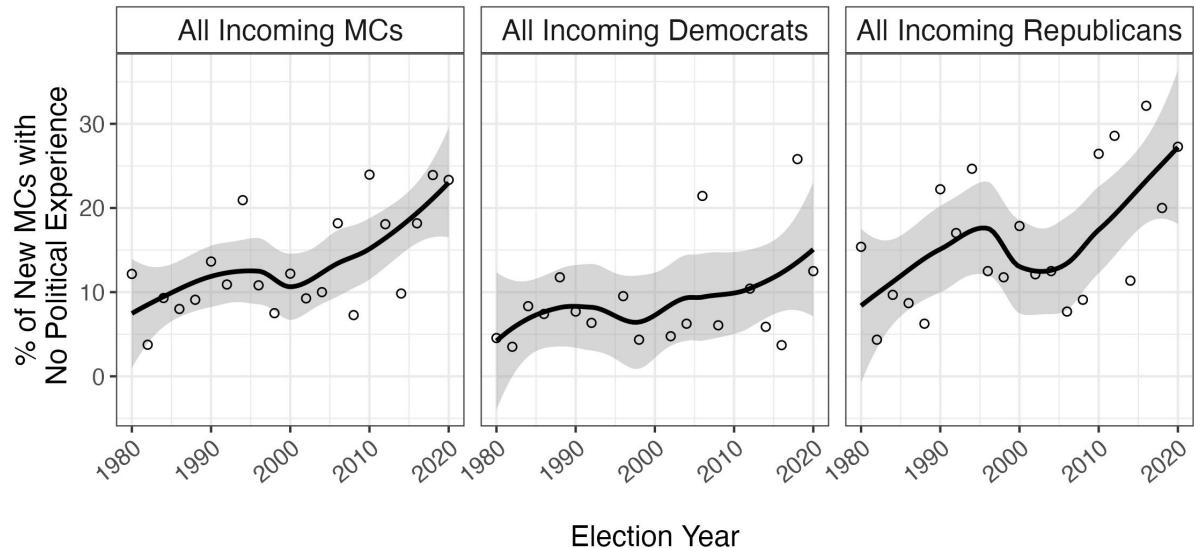
Type	Example Position
Appointees	Federal, state, or local appointment (e.g., U.S. Attorney, Governor's Cabinet)
Non-Elected officials	Positions not publicly elected (e.g. state or local party executive)
Government employment	Federal, state, or local (e.g., congressional aide, presidential advisor)
Lawyers	Individuals who currently or in the past were practicing lawyers
Other Political Employee	Employment with expressed ties to government or influencing policy (e.g., CEO of Heritage Foundation, policy advisor at think-tank, lobbyist on Capitol Hill)

Figure 10: Percent of Freshmen Members of the U.S. House of Representatives with No Political Experience (Lawyers Excluded), 1980-2020



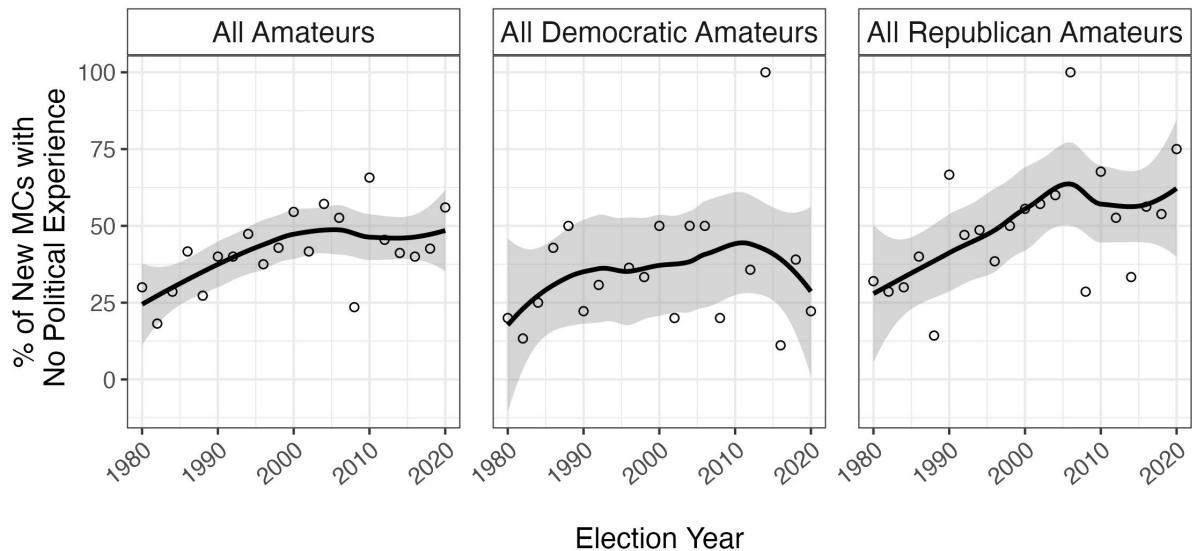
Note: In plotted yearly proportions, the denominator includes all newly elected, freshmen members of the U.S. House of Representatives (i.e., no incumbents) in the left panel, newly elected Democrats in the middle panel, and newly elected Republicans in the right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those newly elected members who have no previous political experience (excluding lawyers). Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle.

Figure 11: Percent of Freshmen Members of the U.S. House of Representatives with No Political Experience (Including Family Ties), 1980-2020



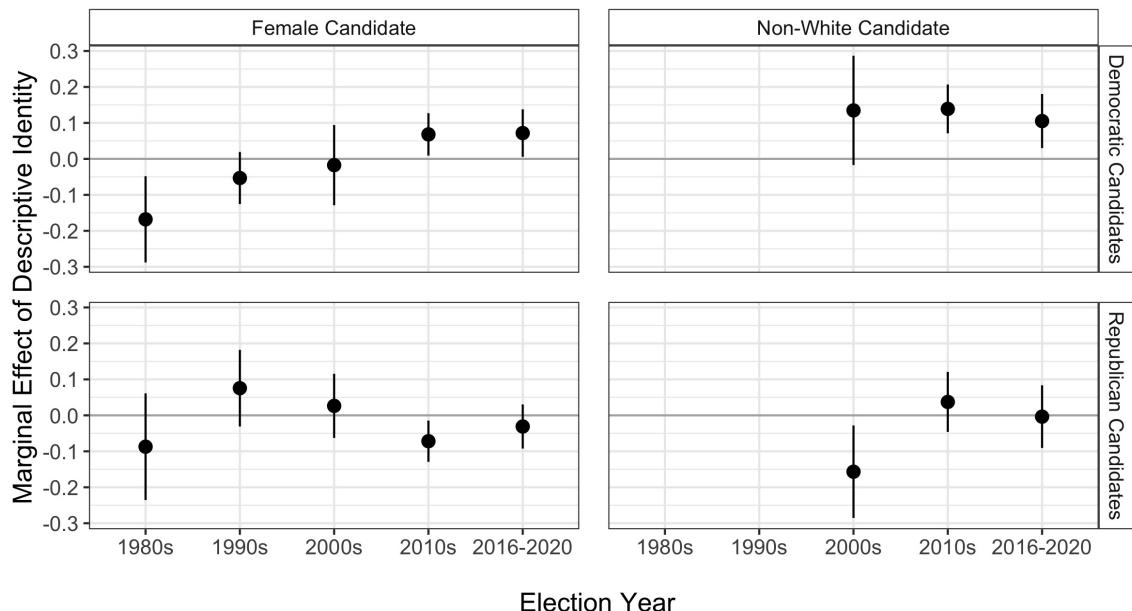
Note: In plotted yearly proportions, the denominator includes all newly elected, freshmen members of the U.S. House of Representatives (i.e., no incumbents) in the left panel, newly elected Democrats in the middle panel, and newly elected Republicans in the right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those newly elected members who have no previous political experience (including immediate family political ties). Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle.

Figure 12: Percent of Amateur Freshmen Members of the U.S. House of Representatives with No Political Experience, 1980-2020



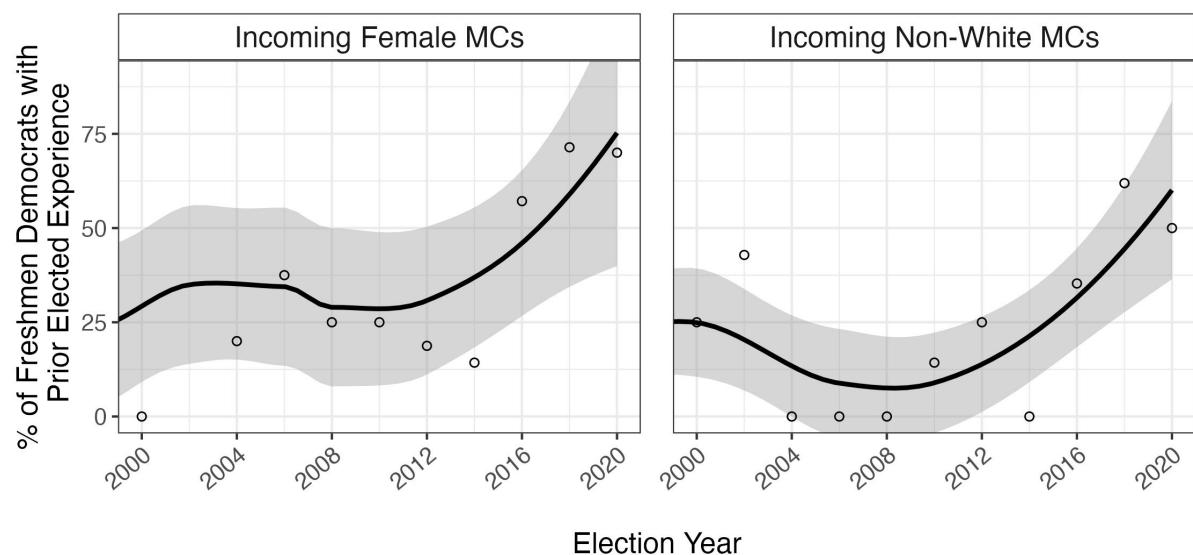
Note: In plotted yearly proportions, the denominator includes all newly elected amateur members of the U.S. House of Representatives in the left panel, newly elected Democrats in the middle panel, and newly elected Republicans in the right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those freshmen, amateur MCs who have no previous political experience. Proportions do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle.

Figure 13: Marginal Effect of Descriptive Identities on Predicted Probability of Winning Open Seat Primary Elections



Note: Quantities of interest are marginal effects of female (left panels) and non-white (right panels) identities on the predicted probability of primary election victory in open seats for Democrats (top panels) and Republicans (bottom panels). Marginal effects are estimated using model coefficients presented in Table 2. Results are presented with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 14: Percent of Freshmen Female/Non-White Democrat Members of the U.S. House of Representatives with No Political Experience, 2000-2020



Note: In plotted yearly percentages, the denominator includes all newly-elected, female Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives in the left panel, and newly elected non-white Democrats in right panel. The numerator in each panel includes those freshmen Democratic MCs who have no previous political experience. Percentages do not include new members who won special elections caused by vacancies outside of the regular election cycle.