

# Reevaluating Experience in Congressional Primary Elections

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## Abstract

The dynamics of congressional primaries have changed dramatically in recent years. Today, political amateurs are more likely to defeat incumbents and experienced “quality” candidates than ever before. These trends lead us to question whether traditional theories of candidate success translate to today’s primary electoral landscape. Utilizing new data on candidate political experience for all primary candidates from 1980 to 2018, we show that past political experience is no longer the overriding predictor for primary election success. We test three potential explanations for this change: 1) voters’ preferences for inexperienced candidates; 2) the ideology of the candidates; and 3) the role of PAC money. We demonstrate PAC contributions to amateurs have skyrocketed in tandem with inexperienced candidate success. Finally, we evaluate whether nominating a politically inexperienced candidate puts parties at a disadvantage in the general election.

# Introduction

On June 10, 2014, David Brat, a relatively unknown Economics professor at Randolph-Macon College shocked the political world by defeating then House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) in the Republican primary. Cantor's loss was shocking because it was unprecedented — Cantor was the first sitting House Majority Leader in history to lose his congressional seat in a primary. It also challenged the foundation of what scholars know about congressional elections: incumbents win at very high rates and candidates with previous electoral experience tend to outperform those with no experience in both general and primary elections (e.g. Jacobson, 1989). Cantor was powerful, experienced, widely known, and well-funded, while Brat had none of the typical attributes of a successful challenger, lacking any political experience whatsoever.

Although the loss of a politically-experienced politician like Cantor could be dismissed as an anomaly, we contend that this is not the case. We have systematically collected data on the political background and occupational history for nearly every candidate who filed to run in a primary election for the House of Representatives from 1980 to present, totaling to over 26,000 primary candidates.<sup>1</sup> We show that Cantor's loss appears to be the leading edge of a new trend in congressional elections: prior political experience is a less necessary condition for electoral success. From 2000 to 2010 only a handful of inexperienced candidates bested an incumbent to win their party's primary, with over 70% of incumbent defeats coming from an experienced challenger.<sup>2</sup> More recent primary elections have seen a complete reversal with *in*experienced challengers defeating the vast majority of incumbents.<sup>3</sup> The diminishing value of past electoral experience is even more

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<sup>1</sup>The data collection will be discussed further below, but using local newspapers, campaign websites, and archive records. We successfully determined the political background / occupation of over 90 percent of the candidates that ran between 1980 and 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Between 2000 and 2010 five incumbents were defeated by an inexperienced challenger and thirteen incumbents were defeated by an experienced challenger. These numbers are similar to those in the previous decade where 63% of incumbent defeats came from experienced challengers. These numbers do not include incumbent vs. incumbent primaries.

<sup>3</sup>Inexperienced candidates defeated 11 or 68% of incumbents who lost their party's primary from

pronounced in non-incumbent primaries. From 1980-2014, “quality” candidates who had previously held elected office won 73% of primaries without an incumbent, on average.<sup>4</sup> Since then, experienced candidates have won only *half* of these primaries.

In this paper, we illustrate this new trend towards inexperience, explain why experience in elective office matters less than it did before, and explore what this means for the future of congressional elections and the institution of Congress. We investigate three principle motivations for these changing dynamics: voter demand for inexperienced candidates, differences in candidate ideology, and changes in primary election fundraising. While it would be ideal to examine those races where a member of Congress lost her primary to an inexperienced challenger, there are significant data limitations. Incumbents today may feel more vulnerable at the primary stage, as they now have more reason to fear a wide range of opponents, but their reelection rates are still high. Given that most incumbents are still winning their primary, this paper focuses on primaries without an incumbent to better assess how past political experience helps — or hurts — a candidate’s chances for primary election success.

## The Electoral Success of Congressional Candidates

The characteristics that structure success in the general election can provide a guide to understanding congressional candidate success in the primary. Scholars have long known that incumbency is the number one predictor of candidate success. For the last two decades, incumbent reelection rates in the general election 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

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2012-2018.

<sup>4</sup>These include seats with no running incumbent (i.e. open races), contests in new districts, and primaries for the district’s non-incumbent party.

and Brumberg, 1982), legislative casework (Fiorina, 1977), and redistricting (Erikson, 1972; Cover, 1977). Other work suggests it results from the member's home style — her behavior back home in the district (Fenno, 1978), the strategic entry and exit decisions of candidates (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Cox and Katz, 1996), and the personal vote (Carson et al., 2007; Cain et al., 1987). In short, the experience of running for and holding office clearly matters to electoral success.

It follows that, for non-incumbents, the number one predictor of electoral success has been previous experience in elective office (Jacobson, 1989). These “quality candidates” have several attributes that contribute to their success: they know how to raise funds and run a successful campaign (Abramowitz, 1991; Box-Steffensmeier, 1996); they are adept at choosing when to seek office (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Jacobson, 1989; Cox and Katz, 1996); and they start most races with a high level of name recognition (Grimmer, 2013). Although defeating an incumbent is rare, the combination of strategic entry decisions and campaign acumen has traditionally given such candidates the best chance to knock off vulnerable incumbents or emerge successful in open seat contests.

Recent congressional election outcomes suggest a need to update our theories for the effect of past political experience on primary election success. With increased levels of party loyalty in the electorate, the incumbency advantage in general elections has diminished (Jacobson, 2015). As voters increasingly choose candidates who share their party affiliation, a candidate's personal brand or track record provides less guidance in the general election. The increasing rate of party line voting does not, however, help us explain races such as the one between Brat and Cantor where party affiliation is held constant.

Being a traditional quality challenger may no longer be a prerequisite for success because today's voters do not see value in these candidates' political past. With trust in and approval of Congress consistently low and anti-Congress sentiment high, the same

environment which fueled the successful party nomination of President Trump in 2016 could also be playing out at the congressional level. Characteristics other than those derived from a candidate’s experience — like ideological extremism and political “outsider” status — tend to resonate with primary election voters (Brady et al., 2007; Hansen and Treul, 2019). Accordingly, we suspect that voter dissatisfaction with Washington could be opening the door to inexperienced primary challengers. It could also be the case that amateurs today have greater access to the financial resources necessary to mount a competitive campaign. Inexperienced candidates are generally weak fundraisers. They lack the professional and political connections needed to amass campaign contributions (Albert et al., 2015; Bonica, 2017) and are not running to win, but rather to gain political experience (Canon, 1993). On the other hand, the fundraising potential of ambitious amateurs — who are seriously seeking office — can equal that of experienced candidates when they self-select into the best races (Maestas and Rugeley, 2008). We posit that if strategic, ambitious amateurs are out-fundraising their experienced counterparts, this may help to explain their recent successes in primary elections.

Our goal in this paper is to demonstrate why experience is a less influential predictor of success in primary elections. In doing so, we add to our understanding of what this change means for the future of congressional elections and the institution of Congress. Our analyses explore whether the increased success of inexperienced candidates is the result of the ideological leanings of the candidates, the role of PAC money, or whether it is simply that voters want inexperienced candidates who offer a credible alternative to the current dysfunctional Congress.

## **Amateur Success in Primary Elections**

The first step in teasing out the changing dynamics of primaries is to assess continuity and change in election outcomes over time. To that end, we create a comprehensive data

set of all primary challengers from 1980-2018.<sup>5</sup> To our knowledge, this is the first data set on primary congressional elections that comprehensively codes the candidate's experience in elective office or elsewhere for this entire time period. Beyond the simple dichotomous measure, we also coded for the type of political or professional experience the challenger had before running for office. If the value of experience in elections is indeed decreasing, understanding whether an experienced candidate was a city councilman or a state senator could provide leverage in explaining why these candidates are less successful in today's elections. Conversely, if the value inexperienced is *increasing*, knowing if a non-quality challenger was a practicing lawyer or a Marine could provide greater insight into what types of past occupational experience voters most value.<sup>6</sup>

The list of primary candidates included in our data set was taken from the Federal Elections Commission and the American Votes book series. Information about candidate experience was manually coded from newspaper articles, campaign websites, and archive records; these data were particularly difficult to find for the 1980s and early 1990s. For these earlier decades we utilized digital newspaper archives available at Newspapers.com to code the experience and occupation variables. We employed two source verification to ensure correct reporting for the experience variable. For those candidates we could not find, a similar search was conducted through Google News followed by a simple Google search.<sup>7</sup> Each primary election candidate is coded for her highest level of political experience or her most recent and relevant qualification for holding elective office.<sup>8</sup> In our

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<sup>5</sup>No write-in candidates were included in the data.

<sup>6</sup>We intentionally move away from the dichotomous "quality" measure, as our data allow us to dig deeper than a simple dichotomous measure and explore types of occupational experience that might also influence success.

<sup>7</sup>For a complete description of our coding strategy and data collection, see Appendix Section A.1

<sup>8</sup>We assigned each candidate a code corresponding to her professional or political occupation. Each candidate was only assigned one code, indicating her highest level of political experience or her most relevant qualification for holding office. For candidates who held multiple elected positions, we assigned the code corresponding to their highest level of political office. For candidates without prior experience in elective office, more discretion was necessary. In most cases, the occupation coded was the one that accompanied the candidate's name. For example, a newspaper might write, "John Smith, a lawyer from Smalltown, is running for office." The coding of challengers' occupations was challenging, as many primary candidates do not have previous electoral experience or other noteworthy experience, which can make it

data collection, we successfully located the experience and occupation variables for 26,273 candidates in congressional primaries, which equates to 90% of all candidates who ran between 1980 and 2018, including incumbents.<sup>9</sup> We coded 4,316 challengers as possessing prior experience in elective office and determined the seat they had held previously for 99% of those candidates.

Using our occupational data on nearly all primary candidates dating back to 1980, we examine all contested primaries without an incumbent<sup>10</sup> where at least one experienced candidate ran, giving voters the choice between at least one candidate with political experience and one without.<sup>11</sup> From these data, we can calculate the percent of primaries won by experienced and inexperienced candidates over time. The data in Figure 1 shows that, from 1980-2014, candidates who had previously held elective office won 73% of primaries without an incumbent, on average.<sup>12</sup> These patterns of success are what prior literature on candidate experience would lead us to expect. However, in the 2016 and 2018 elections a stark divergence emerges with inexperienced candidates seeing greater success than ever before.<sup>13</sup>

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difficult to code their occupation accurately. If there were multiple occupations attributed to a candidate, coders first looked for the occupation most closely associated with a job in politics/government. These were often non-elected positions such as an advisor or an appointed position. If there was no occupation seemingly directly relevant to politics, the coders looked for the occupation with the highest level of required education. If a candidate had no noteworthy experience, they were coded accordingly.

<sup>9</sup>This is greater than Carson and Pettigrew (2013) found for the late 19th and early 20th century and very much in line with the rate found by Jacobson (1989) for the post-World War II era.

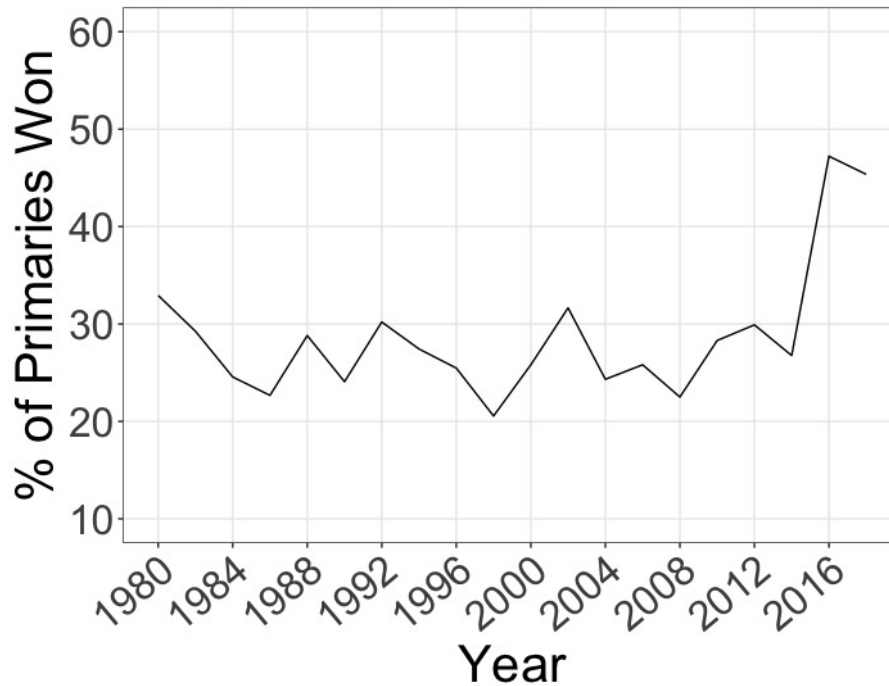
<sup>10</sup>We chose to focus on non-incumbent primaries because, while the trend might be changing, it is still the case that typically when incumbents run they win. This does not mean, however, that analyzing primaries without an incumbent is uninteresting, as there is always potential, especially in competitive districts, that the primary without the incumbent will produce the general election victor.

<sup>11</sup>From 1980-2018 about 30% of contested, non-incumbent primaries (not including top two or jungle primaries) had at least one quality candidate.

<sup>12</sup>Democrats with prior experience, on average, won 76% of non-incumbent primaries during this time period and experienced Republicans won, on average, 70% of non-incumbent primaries.

<sup>13</sup>Though amateurs are besting experienced candidates more than ever in the primary, they are not any more successful than they were in the past at beating incumbents. From 1980 to 2012, 32 amateurs beat an incumbent to win their party's nomination, an average of just 1.88 candidates per year. Since 2014, 7 candidates have defeated an incumbent in the primary election—three of them inexperienced candidates—making it unlikely that an inexperienced candidate defeats an incumbent. That said, incumbents still fear a primary loss, especially as some prominent members of Congress (e.g. Eric Cantor and Joseph Crowley) have been defeated in primaries by amateurs.

Figure 1: Percent of Primaries Without an Incumbent Won by Inexperienced Candidates, 1980-2018



*Note:* The figure shows the percent of primaries without an incumbent won by an inexperienced candidate. All non-incumbent primaries where there was at least one experienced and one inexperienced candidate are included. Inexperienced candidates are those without any previous experience in elective office.

Figure 1 indicates that in 2014 an inexperienced candidate bested an experienced candidate to win her party's nomination less than 30% of the time. In 2016, however, inexperienced candidate success surged with these candidates winning nearly half of all primary contests. In 2018, this trend persists; inexperienced candidates won 46% of primaries against an experienced candidate. Over the past two elections, amateurs have won 78 of 169 non-incumbent primaries. Almost half of these successful inexperienced candidates have gone on to win the general election. Indeed, since 2014 over fifty percent of new members of Congress attained office having never held a publicly elected position before. The recent primary performance of amateur candidates is unprecedented, with success rates nearly twenty points above average inexperienced candidate performance before 2014. Broken down by party, a similar trend emerges where the success of experienced candidates began to change in 2014, first among Republicans and later among Democrats.



For Republicans, an inexperienced candidate won nearly 60% of non-incumbent primaries in 2016. This percentage decreased slightly in 2018 to 47%. For Democrats, an inexperienced candidate won only 30% of all non-incumbent primaries in 2016. This percentage increased dramatically in 2018 where nearly 45% of Democratic non-incumbent primaries won by an inexperienced candidate.

The data in Figure 1 demonstrate that inexperienced candidates are winning a greater proportion of primaries than in the past and are besting politically experienced candidates to do so. Findings later in this paper further demonstrate these amateur candidates' lack of political experience does not hinder their ability to succeed in the general election. These results run against conventional wisdom on electoral experience, demonstrating that candidates with a political background no longer have a leg up on their amateur competition. To explain why the success rate of inexperienced candidates has grown we explore three possible explanations: voter demand for inexperienced candidates, differences in candidate ideology, and changes in the dynamics of campaign fundraising.

## **Testing Inexperienced Candidates Success**

### **Amateur Candidate Occupation & Non-Elective Experience**

To explore inexperienced candidate success, we first assess the types of non-elected experience today's (2012-2018) amateurs possess. As previously discussed, our data collection of occupational experience goes beyond whether or not a candidate has a political record. Each primary election candidate is coded for her highest level of political experience or her most recent and relevant qualification for holding elective office. These unique data allow us to assess whether certain *types* of amateur candidates are experiencing better electoral fortunes or if the success of amateurs in primary elections is widespread. In Figure 2, the reported percentages correspond to the proportion of winners from each occupational background present in the data among amateur candidates. Inexperienced

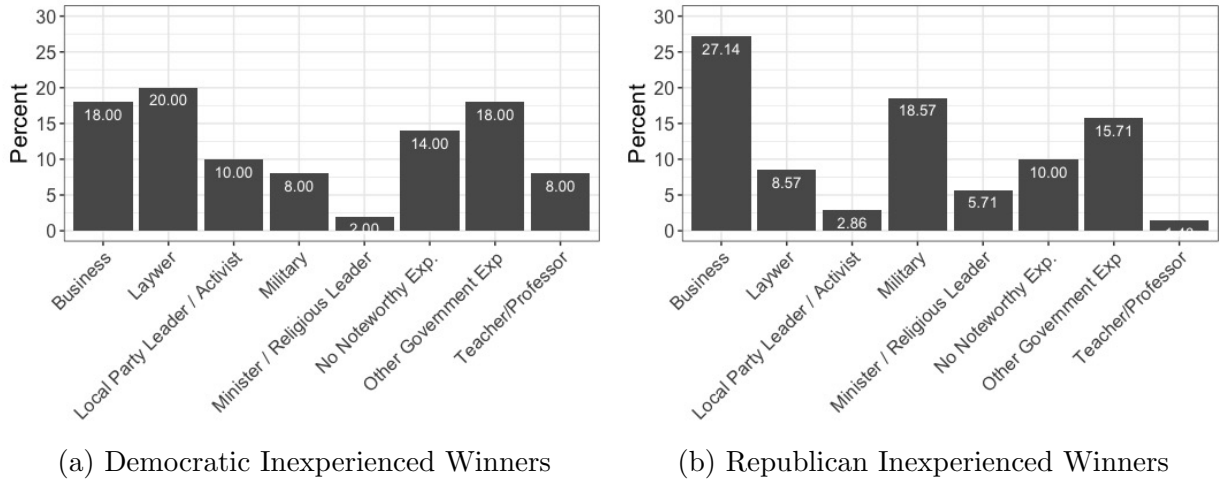


Figure 2: Occupation of Inexperienced Candidate Winners, 2012-2018

*Note:* Percents are generated by dividing the total number of amateur winners by occupation over the total number of amateur winners by party from 2012 to 2018. Seventy-two Republican amateurs beat out an experience candidate to earn the party’s nomination during the time period of interest. Fifty-one Democratic amateurs bested an experienced candidate.

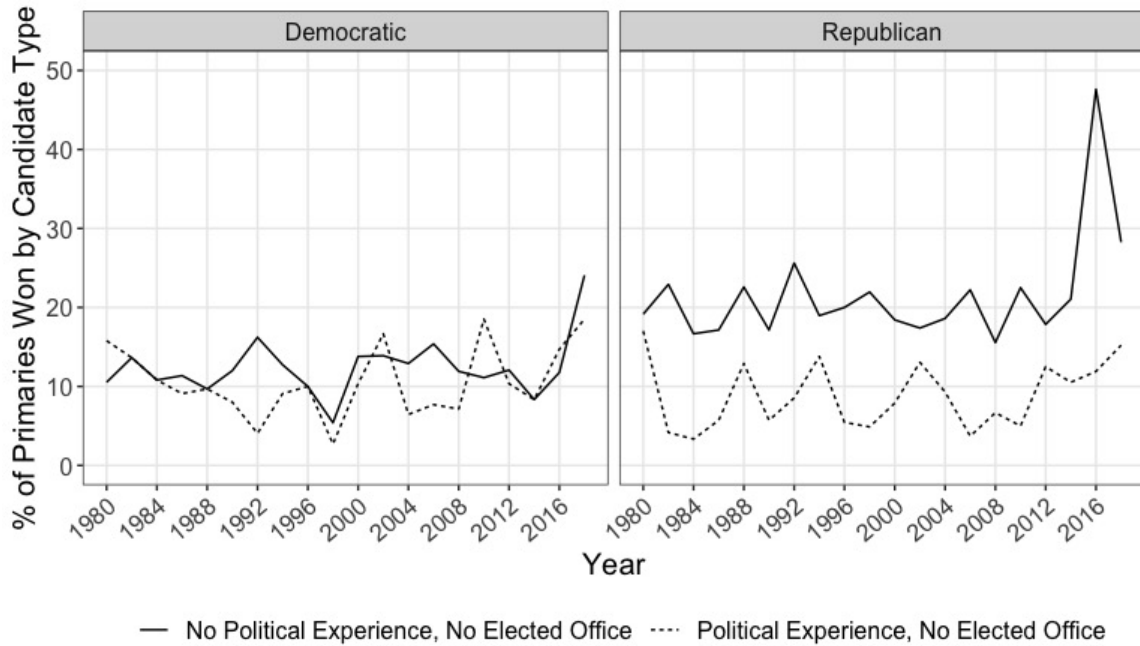
candidates are broken down by party because it is surely the case that Democratic and Republican voters prize different types of non-elected experience in their representatives. In both Figure 2a and 2b candidates with a business-related occupation are among the most successful, constituting nearly 20% of Democratic inexperienced winners and 27% of Republican winners between 2012 and 2018. Candidates with a military background are especially successful in Republican races, constituting almost 20% of winners in these recent elections. Beyond the “Business” and “Military” occupational type, top categories for both parties also include lawyers, local party leaders, and candidates with other government experience (i.e. official aides, bureaucrats).

These data present two possibilities. First, it could be the case that the recent surge in inexperienced candidate success may be explained by a rise in the value of inexperience. Voters dissatisfaction with Washington (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015) might lead them to look for an outsider, making those candidates who lack elected political experience preferable to more traditional candidates who previously served in elective office. These true amateurs likely have an easier time projecting an outsider story to voters. Recent

work by Hansen and Treul (2019) employs 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. In sum, primary voters might be looking for something other than experience in electoral office from their candidates. If this is the case, amateurs with other kinds of experience (i.e. military veterans, church leaders, or businesspeople) may be driving the recent successes of inexperienced candidates. Another possibility is that the dichotomous distinction of inexperienced/experienced with regards to holding elective office no longer works, or at least does not work for primary elections. While amateurs like lawyers, government aides, and bureaucrats have never held publicly elected office, their close ties to government and law may provide enough non-elected experience to enjoy the same advantages afforded to traditional “quality” candidates. In other words, these types of occupational backgrounds may be valuable enough to constitute “experience.”

To test these hypotheses, we assess candidate success based on different levels of experience. Here we take advantage of our comprehensive occupational data and break down inexperienced candidates into two sub-categories similarly to Roberds and Roberts (2002). We classify non-elected governmental officials, former congressional aides or advisers, local party leaders, and lawyers as “Political Experience, No Elected Office” and other occupations (e.g. educator, military, doctor) as “No Political Experience, No Elected Office.” A complete list of the occupations in the data and how they are classified can be found in Table A.1 of the appendix. This classification measure is presented in Figure 3. These plots are generated using identical data to that in Figure 1 except here amateurs are broken down into the two sub-categories mentioned above: “Political Experience, No Elected Office” and “No Political Experience, No Elected Office.” As a note, the number of each amateur type running in primaries of interest has remained constant over time for both parties. From 1980-2018, 11.2% and 14% of inexperienced candidates in Democratic and

Figure 3: Percent of Primaries without an Incumbent Won by Inexperienced Candidates, 1980-2018 by Past Political Background



*Note:* All of the candidates never held prior elected office, but some had relevant work experience even though not elected experience. A complete list of the occupations in the data and how they are classified can be found in Table A.1 of the appendix. Only contested primaries without an incumbent are included.

Republican primaries were classified as “Political Experience, No Elected Office.” Each year across this time period, “No Political Experience, No Elected Office” candidates made up at least 80% of the total number of amateurs running for office.

Using our new classification of inexperienced candidates, the right panel of Figure 3 reveals that for Republican primaries without an incumbent, the “No Political Experience, No Elected Office” candidates have won a larger percentage of contests than those “Political Experience, No Elected Office” candidates for the entire time period (1980-2018). That is, Republican voters throughout the time period seem to prefer true novices. The left panel of Figure 3 reveals that the same is not true for Democratic primaries without an incumbent. For Democrats, the inexperienced candidates who win are not always those classified here as “No Political Experience, No Elected Office.” Throughout the time se-

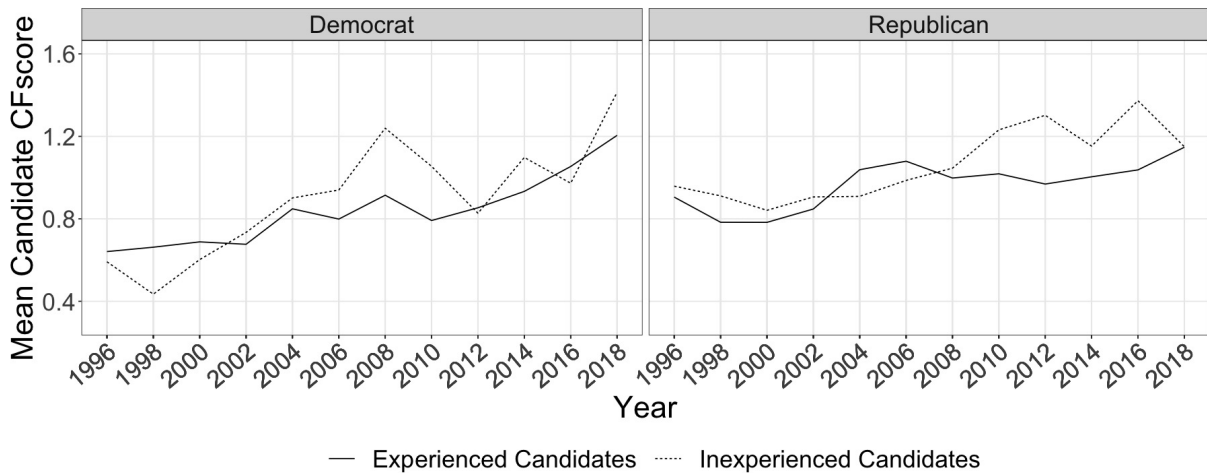
ries (1980-2018), Democrats with relevant political experience and those without perform fairly similarly in elections.

The above findings suggest that there are partisan differences in preferred type of amateur, with Republicans preferring true novices across the time period and Democrats vacillating between preferences for candidates with no relevant political experience and those with this experience. Importantly for our research question, we do not find that voter preferences have changed dramatically over recent years. Democratic and Republican amateur candidate preferences have remained stable over time. It seems that the types of amateurs voters elect has not changed, rather the *quantity* of amateurs winning has increased. While these findings are interesting, the question of why inexperienced candidates are winning now more than they had in the last few decades still remains.

## **Amateur Candidate Ideological Extremity**

A broad body of work suggests that primary voters hold more ideologically extreme policy positions and prefer more ideologically extreme primary candidates (e.g. Brady et al. 2007; Jacobson 2012; Hall 2015), and recent work by Boatright (2014) suggests that many of the primary challenges that happen today are “ideological” in nature. Boatright (2014) defines an ideological challenge as a challenge to an incumbent from the more extreme left or right. If inexperienced candidates are more extreme than experienced candidates, these amateurs may be winning because they are preferred by primary voters, which would account for their success. To measure the ideological extremity of primary election candidates, we turn to Bonica’s (2014) CFscores. This measure uses millions of political contributions to estimate the ideology (liberal vs. conservative) of congressional candidates while also allowing for direct comparisons across actors. Bonica (2019) validates the predictive accuracy of his CFscores, demonstrating that they perform similarly to scaling roll call votes in legislative settings as a means to intuit ideology. A CFscore was generated for nearly 75% of all primary election candidates from 1996-2018 and, moreover, 93% of

Figure 4: Mean CFscore for (In)Experienced Primary Election Candidates, 1996-2018

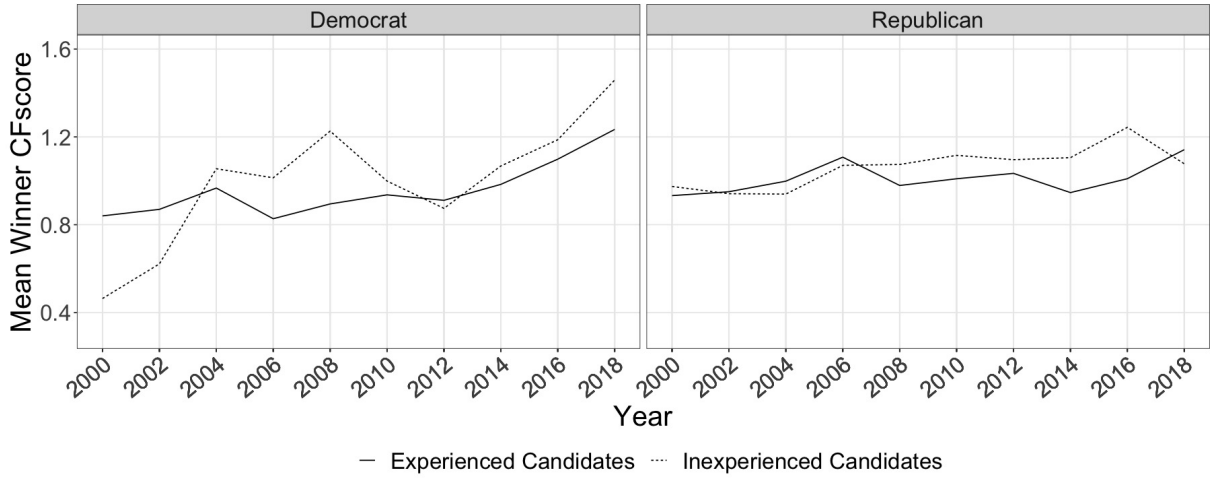


*Note:* The figure on the left displays the mean CFscore for candidates running in Democratic primaries. The figure on the right displays the mean CFscore for candidates running in Republican primaries. In each plot, all candidates for which a CFscore was populated were included. The time series is limited to 1996 to present because this is the farthest back CFscores have been generated for congressional candidates. CFscore scores have been re-scaled such that a score of 0 indicates “moderate” and increasingly positive integers indicate greater ideological extremity.

primary winners. For our analysis, CFscore scores have been re-scaled such that a score of 0 indicates “moderate” and increasingly positive integers indicate greater ideological extremity.

Figure 4 depicts the average ideological CFscore for primary election candidates from 1996 to 2018. The left and right plots compare Democratic and Republican candidates, respectively. Across the examined time period, inexperienced and experienced candidates have gradually become more extreme. The average CFscore for Democratic candidates increased from 0.62 in 1980 to 1.30 in 2018. For Republican candidates, the average CFscore rose from 0.93 to 1.14. Figure 4 further demonstrates that amateur candidates are not systematically more ideological than their experienced counterparts. Whether or not amateurs are more ideologically extreme than experienced candidates varies from year to year. A similar pattern emerges when comparing across primary election *winners* in Figure 5. For example, in 2016 Republican inexperienced primary election winners were,

Figure 5: Mean CFscore for (In)Experienced Primary Election Winners, 1996-2018



*Note:* The figure on the left displays the mean CFscore for primary election winners who ran in Democratic primaries. The figure on the right displays the mean CFscore for primary election winners who ran in Republican primaries. In each plot, all candidates for which a CFscore was populated were included. The time series is limited to 1996 to present because this is the farthest back CFscores have been generated for congressional candidates.

on average, significantly more extreme than experienced winners. However, in 2018, amateur and experienced Republican candidate ideology are statistically indistinguishable. This same relationship can be seen across Democratic races, indicating that inexperienced winners are not systematically more ideologically extreme than those winners with past political experience.

In the appendix, we make two other sets of comparisons showing that inexperienced winners are only slightly more extreme than other quality candidates in their field (Figure A.2) and are less extreme than other amateurs in their field (Figure A.1). Inexperienced candidates who win are also infrequently the most extreme candidate in their race. From 2016-2018, only 26% of all Republican races—nineteen out of seventy-two—were won by the most extreme candidate in the field. Among these extreme winners, 60% were amateurs and 40% were experienced candidates. Similarly, in 2018, Democratic races were won by the most extreme candidate in the field just 25% of the time, or in eighteen out of seventy-four contests; 62% of these winners were amateurs and 38% were experienced

candidates. In sum, inexperienced primary election winners are not significantly more extreme than the experienced candidates they beat out for the nomination.

## **Inexperienced Candidates & PAC Fundraising**

The above analysis suggests that there is something different about today's inexperienced Republican candidates and, more recently, inexperienced Democratic candidates. Having demonstrated that successful inexperienced candidates do not systematically come from a political/government/legal background and that these candidates are not uniquely extreme, we next examine the role of campaign fundraising in amateur candidate success. Aggressive spending in congressional elections can help to boost the viability and visibility of non-incumbent challengers (Jacobson, 1990; Coleman and Manna, 2000). Accordingly, the strongest challengers in a race are often the ones who can raise more money. Maestas and Rugeley (2008) show that, while inexperienced candidates are generally weak fundraisers, when they self-select into the best races their fundraising potential can equal that of experienced candidates. At the primary election level, amateurs have traditionally relied heavily on individual contributions to propel their campaigns, raising far less money from Political Action Committees (PACs) than their experienced counterparts (Albert et al., 2015). This is problematic given that PAC contributions have been shown to be most predictive of future electoral success (Alexander, 2005; Depken, 1998). Unlike self-financing or individual contributions, PAC contributions constitute a strategic investment on behalf of the donating group (Snyder, 1993; Brown, 2013) and therefore require the candidate to reach out to these groups. This type of politicking might be how inexperienced candidates can show they have the talent and skill set to compete with more experienced candidates. If PACs believe that investing in an inexperienced candidate will better advance their policy goals or ideological interests, they will direct their funding to these candidates (Herrnson and Wilcox, 1994).

Building on this, we hypothesize that PAC contributions are a key component in the



recent successes of amateur candidates.<sup>14</sup> To test our hypothesis, we model candidate success in primary elections as a function of candidate electoral characteristics, including primary election fundraising. We constrain our analysis to 2016-2018—which represents the period where amateurs have seen the most success.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, we produce separate analyses for Democrats and Republicans to account for our expectation that the effects of model predictors on success will be conditional on party. Similar to our prior analyses, we examine those primary elections that were contested, non-incumbent races that had at least one candidate running who had previously held elective office and one political amateur.

Modeling our dependent variable—candidate success in primary elections—presents a challenge. Candidate outcomes in the primary are not independent; the success of each candidate is contingent on the performance of other candidates in that same race. To account for this dependency, we model candidate success using a conditional logit. Similar to a multinomial logit, the conditional logit groups discrete alternatives by choice set. In our analysis, choice sets are primary elections and discrete alternatives are candidates. By grouping candidates by primary election, the conditional logit accounts for dependent candidate outcomes within a given race. Therefore, in our model the unit of analysis is a primary election (choice set) rather than an individual candidate (alternative). In a conditional logit the explanatory variables for alternative selection (candidate success) within a choice set (primary election) are attributes of the alternatives (candidates). In short, a candidate’s success in a given primary election is modeled as a function of that candidate’s characteristics—for instance her gender, political experience, or amount of money raised—and the characteristics of other candidates running in that race.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>We do not include Independent Expenditures to primary election candidates because very few candidates receive any funding from IEs at the primary election stage, almost none of them amateur candidates.

<sup>15</sup>Conducting our analysis on years 2012 and 2014 produces substantively similar results.

<sup>16</sup>The conditional logit is extremely flexible, allowing for fluctuations in the number of candidates across primary races and variation in candidate characteristics. However, we exclude top-two primaries from our analysis because they do not fit the assumptions of any commonly used discrete choice model—where there can only be one winner outcome per choice set.

The predictors for our analysis are characteristics of primary election candidates. The independent variable *Experienced Candidate* captures the traditional measure of candidate quality — whether the candidate has held previous elective office. We also fit models using the more nuanced measure of inexperience developed above but find null results for the effect of being an “Political Experience, No Elected Office” candidate on success. The variable *Female* indicates that the candidate identifies as female. *Previous Run for House* is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the candidate has previously run for the House of Representatives in the same congressional district.<sup>17</sup> The variable *Logged PAC Money* is the logged PAC fundraising total for each candidate from the beginning of the electoral cycle (January 1st of the year prior to the election) until the day of the primary. To test the influence of other forms of campaign contributions on electoral success, the logged primary fundraising total for *Independent Expenditures*, *Self-Financing*, and *Individual Contributions* are also included in the model. All data on primary election fundraising was provided by the Federal Election Commission. All contributions classified by the FEC as pertaining to the primary election are included in our analysis.

Table 1 shows the results of the models described above. The table indicates that in Democratic primaries between 2016 and 2018, holding all other variables constant at 0, the probability of winning a primary election for candidates who had previously held elected office was 64%. However, for Republican candidates in our time period of interest, it seems that political experience actually *hampers* success, reducing the probability of winning a primary election to 34%. Replicating our analysis for the 2012 and 2014 elections (see Table A.2 of the appendix), we find past political experience was a stronger predictor for primary election success during this earlier time period for both Democrats and Republicans.<sup>18</sup> These findings align with descriptive data presented in Figure 1. Our

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<sup>17</sup>If the candidate previously ran for the House but ran in a different district, she is considered not to have previously run for the purposes of this variable. Further, write-in candidates or candidates who ran previously but did not meet the low threshold for filing FEC disclosure reports are not considered to have previously run for the House.

<sup>18</sup>In the 2012 and 2014 elections, the coefficient of electoral experience for Democratic races was  $\beta =$

Table 1: Candidate Success in Primary Elections, 2016-2018

	<i>DV: Candidate Won Primary</i>	
	Democratic Races	Republican Races
Experienced Candidate	0.594* (0.285)	-0.800* (0.334)
Logged PAC Fundraising	0.126* (0.045)	0.244* (0.055)
Logged Independent Expenditures	-0.012 (0.038)	0.020 (0.037)
Logged Self-Financing	-0.021 (0.033)	0.081* (0.034)
Logged Individual Contributions	0.228* (0.088)	0.361* (0.112)
Female	0.456 (0.305)	-0.961 (0.494)
Previous Run for Congress	0.041 (0.170)	0.127 (0.247)
Observations	85	81
Log Likelihood	-79.179	-64.293

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

results demonstrate that politically experienced candidates today are no longer afforded the same advantage they were in past elections. This finding speaks to the work of Hansen and Treul (2019) who find that voters are increasingly willing to vote for a candidate who uses anti-establishment rhetoric—all the better and more credible if delivered by someone without political experience.

Turning to our fundraising-based variables, we find support for our hypothesis that fundraising contributions from Political Action Committees are an important component to primary election success. Our findings in Table 1 demonstrate that PAC money and individual contributions have the greatest explanatory power among all contribution-based measures for primary election success.<sup>19</sup> To investigate if the influence of PAC money has changed over time, we compare the *Logged PAC Fundraising* coefficients for Democratic and Republican races in 2016 and 2018 to those for races in 2012 and 2014, presented in Table A.2 of the appendix. For Democratic races the coefficient on PAC fundraising shifted from ( $\beta = 0.169$ ) in 2012/2014 to ( $\beta = 0.126$ ) in 2016/2018; for Republican contests the coefficient changed from ( $\beta = 0.205$ ) to ( $\beta = 0.244$ ). Across these two time periods, there is only a nominal difference in the effect of PAC fundraising on primary election success. In other words, the influence of PAC money in primary elections has remained consistent over time. This means that the recent successes of inexperienced candidates cannot be attributed to a change in how PAC money influences primary election outcomes. For that reason, we next assess how the *quantity* of PAC money flowing to amateur candidates has changed over time.

The Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) at OpenSecrets provides in-depth background information on the types of PACs who donate to congressional campaigns. Each PAC is hand-coded for one of thirteen “economic sectors” (i.e. transportation, construc-

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1.216 and  $\beta = 0.574$  for Republican races.

<sup>19</sup>An alternative specification of this model, where electoral experience is interacted with logged PAC fundraising, is included in Table A.3 of the appendix. There is no statistically significant difference between the explanatory effect of PAC fundraising on amateur and experienced candidate success.

tion, or agriculture) describing the industry which that organization services.<sup>20</sup> Among these, there is a code for “Ideological / Single-Issue” PACs, which include interest groups with specific, narrow policy intentions. For example, PAC-backed interest groups who advocate for foreign and defense policy, gun rights, or human rights as well as PACs with a specific partisan (Democrat vs. Republican) or ideological (liberal vs. conservative) intent are coded as “Ideological” or “Single-Issue.”<sup>21</sup> Using data on PAC contributions provided by the CRP, we find that about 80% of all PAC funding in the primary election comes from Ideological or Single-Issue PACs. However, this is not the case in the general election where only about 10% of PAC funding comes from these types of groups. Money from Ideological and Single-Issue PACs clearly plays an important role in primary election fundraising. This finding aligns with existing work on increasing roll of activist and interest groups in shaping amateur candidate recruitment.<sup>22</sup>

Using data from the Center for Responsive Politics on Ideological and Single-Issue PACs, we begin to address if and how these groups’ giving patterns have changed over time. Because the CRP does not label if each PAC donation was from the primary or general election, we use all data on Ideological / Single-Issue PAC giving.<sup>23</sup> In Figure 6 we plot the proportion of total ideological PAC contributions in a given election year that were received by amateur candidates. To illustrate, if amateur Republican candidates raised a combined \$100,000 in contributions from ideological PACs in 2012 and experienced Republican candidates raised a combined total of \$200,000, then the proportion of ideological money to these amateurs in 2012 would be 33%. Figure 6 demonstrates that, for both Democratic and Republic inexperienced candidates, the proportion of Ideological

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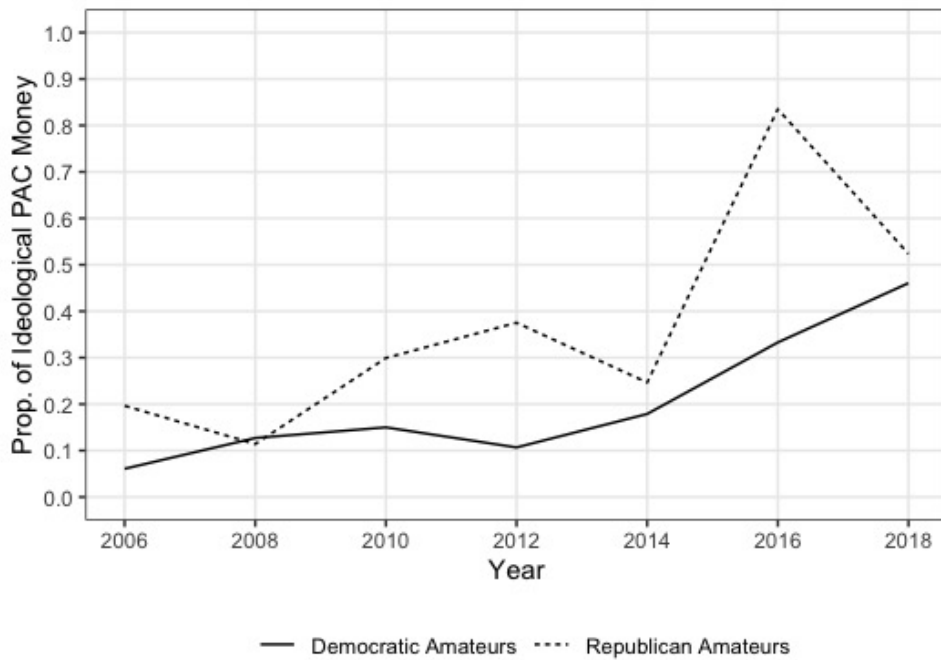
<sup>20</sup>For further information on how the Center for Responsive Politics codes individual PACs see: <https://www.opensecrets.org/resources/ftm/ch12p1.php>.

<sup>21</sup>In the CRP’s coding, leadership PACs are included in the categorization of “Ideological / Single-Issue” PACs. These groups are removed from the subsequent analysis.

<sup>22</sup>See Jonathan Rauch and Raymond J. La Raja’s *Brookings* Report “Re-engineering politicians: How activist groups choose our candidates long before we vote” along with Corey Maneto’s *Vox* article “Citizens United is fueling outsider candidates.”

<sup>23</sup>Recall, a smaller proportion of general election funds come from Ideological / Single-Issue PACs.

Figure 6: Proportion of Total Ideological PAC Money Donated to Amateur Candidates, 2006-2018



*Note:* The figure shows proportion of total ideological PAC contributions to amateur candidates across the primary and general election. To illustrate, if amateur Republican candidates raised a combined \$100,000 in contributions from ideological PACs in 2012 and experienced Republican candidates raised a combined total of \$200,000, then the proportion of ideological money to these amateurs in 2012 would be 33%.

or Single-Issue PAC given to amateur candidates has increased from an average of 25% total contributions to 50% of total contributions.

As amateurs today reach the fundraising potential of their experienced counterparts, they are proving to be just as successful at winning primary elections. We contend that the recent bump in “Ideological / Single-Issue” PAC money directed towards inexperienced candidates, in part, explains their newfound successes. These findings underscore existing literature on the influence of campaign contributions in determining election outcomes. What is *not* clear from our analysis is what motivated this shift in PAC support away from experienced candidates and towards those without a past in politics. Traditionally, the fundraising prowess of quality candidates has been attributed to their past

political experience. Having previously run a campaign, politically experienced candidates possess established fundraising networks and have already learned the ins and out of raising money. However, amateurs today are garnering greater PAC contributions than ever before without such advantages, therefore another explanation is necessary. It could be the case that PACs and interest-groups see amateurs as better-suited to advance their interests in Congress and, therefore, are funneling more money towards these candidates. It could be also be that partisan organizations today have become are better equipped to train political neophytes to succeed as fundraisers. Future research should explore this important question.

## **Amateur Success in General Elections**

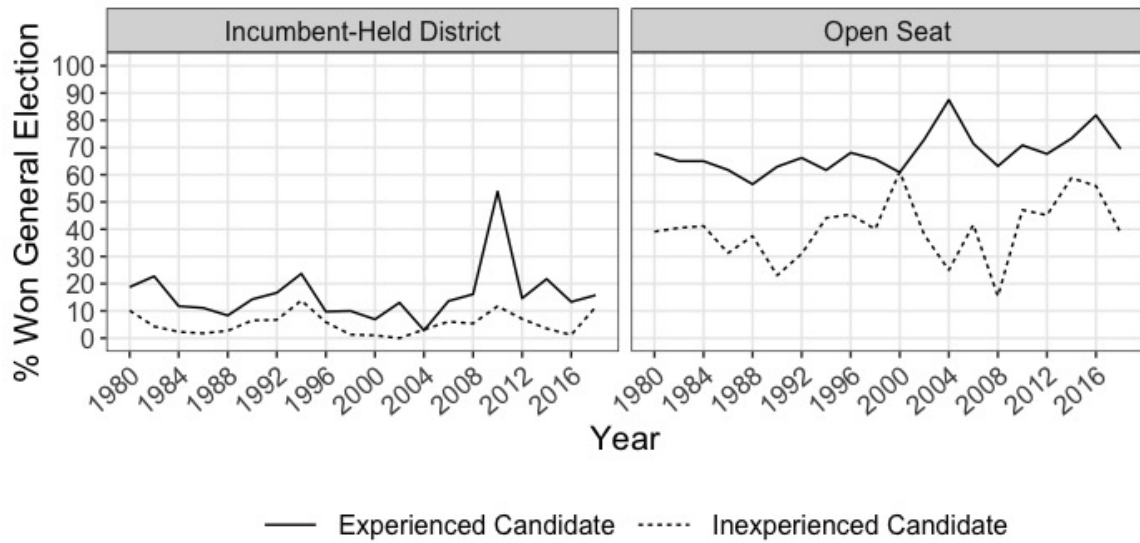
The above analysis indicates that inexperienced candidates are more successful in the primary than ever before and that this shift may be attributable to the surge in PAC money funneled to these candidates. However, just because amateurs are winning primaries doesn't mean that their early successes are noteworthy. It could be the case that while inexperienced candidates are winning primaries, when they get to the general election they lose to a more experienced candidate. In Figure 7, we assess inexperienced and experienced candidate success in the general election.<sup>24</sup> The left plot shows the percent of experienced and inexperienced primary election winners who went on to beat an incumbent in the general election.<sup>25</sup> So, if ten inexperienced candidates won their primary and only two defeated the district incumbent in the general election, the amateur candidate success rate would be 20%. Despite recent amateur successes in the primary, inexperienced candidates are not systematically going on to defeat current members of Congress; their rate of defeating incumbents is similar to that of experienced candidates — with the notable exception of 2010 where 28 out of 52 experienced challengers bested an incum-

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<sup>24</sup>When broken down by party, both the left and right plot produce similar results.

<sup>25</sup>The spike in experienced candidate success for 2010 in Figure 7 can be attributed to the wave of Tea Party candidate victories within the Republican Party over Democratic incumbents that year.

Figure 7: Amateur and Experienced Candidate Success in the General Election, 1980-2018 by Race Type



*Note:* Both figures plot the percent of general elections won by experienced and inexperienced candidates from 1980 to 2018. The left figure shows the percent of races where an experienced/inexperienced candidate beat an incumbent in the general election. The right figure shows the percent of general elections won by an experienced/inexperienced candidate who ran in an open race (i.e. contest where there was no running incumbent). States with top-two or jungle primaries are excluded from calculations.

bent in the general election. The right plot shows the yearly percent of experienced and inexperienced candidates who ran in an open seat (i.e. a race with no running incumbent) and won the general election. Across the entire time period, experienced candidates in open races are consistently more likely to win the general election than are their amateur counterparts. Since 2014, experienced candidates running in open contests went on to win nearly 75% of general elections.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, inexperienced candidates won less than half of general elections in open seats.

Why might inexperienced candidates lose more often than experienced candidates in the general election? It could be the case that the systematic advantages afforded to candidates with electoral experience make them better equipped to win general elections. If this is true, it means that nominating an amateur in the primary puts the party at a

<sup>26</sup>A plurality of experienced candidates losses were due to an experienced candidate defeating another experienced candidate.



disadvantage in the general election. However, it may also be the case that the successes of strategic or “ambitious” amateurs are masked in the statistics presented above. Unlike experienced candidates—who are judicious in their emergence decisions (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Banks and Kiewiet, 1989)—most amateurs will run in *any* type of race, including those that are “unwinnable.” For instance, even if a Democratic amateur won her primary, she would have little to no chance of defeating the incumbent representative in a safely Republican district. According to Canon (1993), amateurs entering into these types of races are only running to gain political experience, rather than to mount a credible campaign. Strategic amateurs, on the other hand, may be more careful about the types of contests they enter and, for that reason, have a greater rate of general election success (Maestas and Rugeley, 2008).

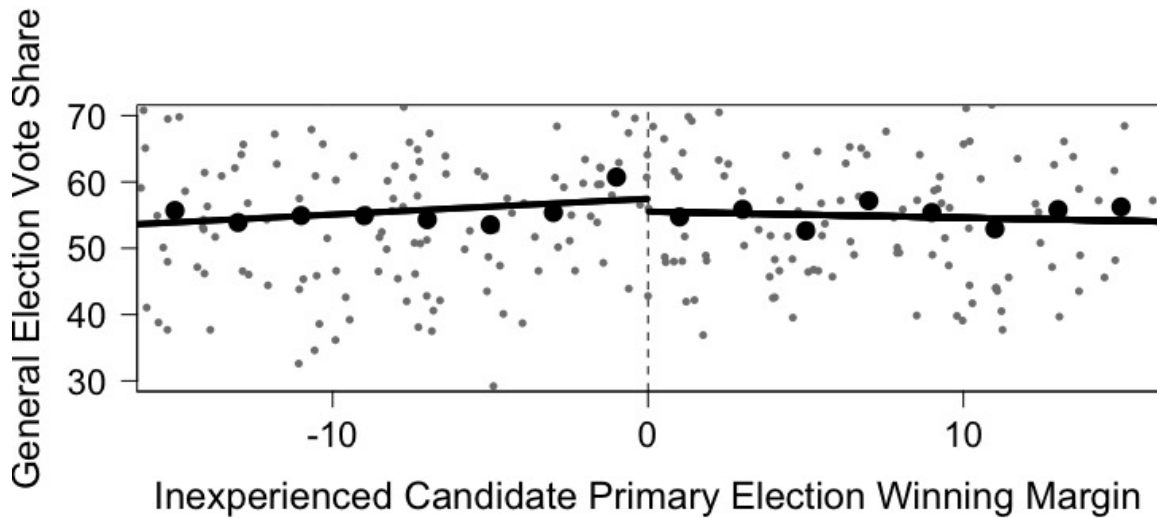
We employ a regression discontinuity design to investigate whether amateurs who best a politically experienced candidate in the primary do *worse* in the general election. The as-if random nomination of candidates in close primary elections allows us to directly assess counterfactual comparisons between districts that nominated an experienced candidate and those that nominated an inexperienced candidate. Our approach is similar to Hall (2015), who compares the success of extreme and moderate nominees in the general election. We can assume that inexperienced candidates who had to beat out an experienced candidate to win the primary are the kinds of “ambitious” amateurs who have the greatest likelihood of success in the general. If these amateurs are *just as likely* to win the general election as experienced candidates, this will serve as further evidence that candidates without a political past are a force to be reckoned with in today’s congressional elections. It will also counter prevailing wisdom that nominating a politically experienced candidate gives parties their best shot at winning the general election.

Our results are presented in Figure 8. Both figures compare the general election performance of amateurs and experienced candidates who won a close primary election. The

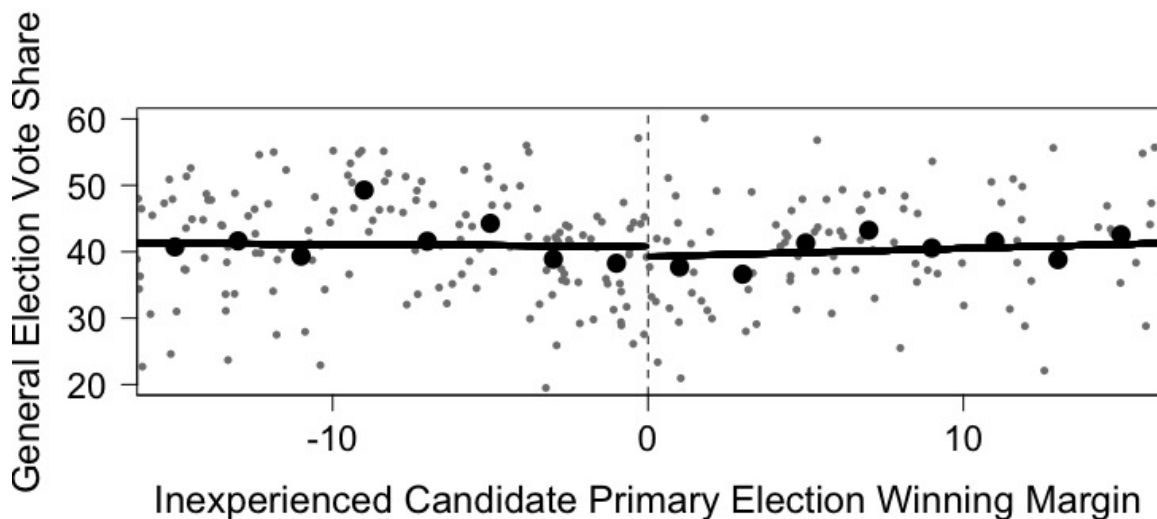
top figure compares the general election vote share of amateur and experienced candidates who won the primary election and then went on to face an experienced candidate in the general. The bottom figure compares the general election vote share of amateur and experienced candidates who won the primary election and then went on to face an incumbent in the general. The y-axis denotes the general election vote share of primary election winners. The x-axis denotes the primary election winning margin for the inexperienced candidate. If the primary winning margin is positive, this means that the inexperienced candidate barely beat out the experienced candidate to win their party's nomination. If the primary winning margin is negative, this means the inexperienced candidate barely lost and the experienced candidate she faced advanced to the general election. This "running" variable assigns the RDD treatment status of inexperienced candidate win/loss.

The lines in Figure 8a and Figure 8b are OLS fits from the raw data estimated separately on each side of the threshold. If it is the case that amateurs perform *worse* than experienced candidates in the general election, then there should be a significant drop in OLS fit along the right side of the discontinuity. This would indicate that amateurs perform worse in the general election than politically experienced candidates after a narrow primary election victory. However, the regression discontinuity indicates that candidate experience does *not* have a significant impact on the party's vote share in the general election. In Figure 8a, there is just a 2% difference between the general election vote share of amateur and experienced candidates conditional on as-if random assignment to the general election. In Figure 8b, the difference in vote share between amateurs and experienced candidates who go on to face an incumbent in the general is 2.5%. It is worth noting that the OLS fits on general election vote share are lower in Figure 8b (0.40) than Figure 8a (0.49) because both amateurs and experienced candidates perform worst against an incumbent. Narrowing the time period of our analysis in Figure 8a to only elections

Figure 8: General-Election Vote Share After Close Primary Elections Between Inexperienced and Experienced Candidates, 1980-2018



(a) Experienced Candidate vs. Amateur/Experienced Candidate in the General Election



(b) Incumbent vs. Amateur/Experienced Candidate in the General Election

*Note:* The top figure compares the general election vote share of amateur and experienced candidates who won the primary election and then went on to face an experienced candidate in the general (N = 272). The bottom figure compares the general election vote share of amateur and experienced candidates who won the primary election and then went on to face an incumbent in the general (N = 399). The bandwidth specified in Figure 8a and Figure 8b are 19.11% and 28.10%, respectively. These bandwidths are specified using the Imbens-Kalyanaraman method. Large black points are averages in 2 point bins of candidates' winning margin; small gray points are raw data. Lines are OLS fits from raw data estimated separately on each side of threshold. For races to be included in our RDD, they must meet two criteria. First, the top two candidates in the primary election of interest must be an amateur and an experienced candidate. Second, the nominated candidate must face an experienced candidate in the general election.

after 2010 produces substantively identical results.<sup>27</sup> Estimating Figure 8a with only competitive races also produces substantively identical results.<sup>28</sup> These findings suggest that inexperienced candidates in today’s elections not only win primaries with greater frequency but also go on to be just as successful as their experienced counterparts in the general election. This finding reinforces the notion that nominating an ambitious, well-funded amateur does not put parties at a disadvantage. These kinds of candidates are just as likely as their experienced counterparts to succeed in the general election. Further, with limited Washington ties and the “outsider” status that today’s voters find attractive, these kinds of candidates may even be *preferable* as the party’s nominee.

## Discussion

Our results show that in recent elections, candidates with prior experience in elective office are not as successful as they once were. Although this trend first emerged in Republican primaries, our data on the 2018 primary cycle suggests it has spread to the Democratic party as well. We test three potential explanations for this change: 1) voters’ preferences for inexperienced candidates; 2) the ideology of the candidates; and 3) the role of PAC money. The findings suggest PAC money can propel inexperienced candidates to success in congressional primaries. In today’s world of seemingly unlimited money, inexperienced candidates who garner the attention of Ideological and Single-Issue PACs in the primary campaign season are increasingly likely to win. All of this suggests that money is a big-time player not just in general elections, but in primary elections as well—big enough to swamp candidate experience. For inexperienced candidates who want to prove they have the political skills necessary to win elections similar to their more “experienced” competitors, the influx of PAC money allows them to do just that. In order to entice PAC money, inexperienced candidates reach out to these groups and in doing so demonstrate

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<sup>27</sup>These findings are presented in Figure A.4 of the appendix.

<sup>28</sup>These findings are presented in Figure A.3 of the appendix.

their fundraising talent, messaging, and general politicking. This suggests the chasing of non-party PAC money has the potential to even the playing field when it comes to experience in congressional primary elections, but it simultaneously places a premium on fundraising ability.

Having new voices in Congress and people who are not necessarily career-politicians may have some advantages, but there could be negative repercussions as well. On the positive side, there is little doubt that the success of inexperienced candidates in primaries means there will be new voices in Washington and this success may encourage a broader range of candidates to seek office. In fact, the 2018 primary season saw a massive increase in the emergence of non-traditional candidates, and the following general election sent several new faces to Congress, many of whom did not have previous experience in elective office (e.g. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) is the youngest woman to ever serve in Congress). These new voices could help increase descriptive representation in a chamber that skews heavily towards elderly, white men. 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 U.S. is non-trivial and the policy environment is extraordinarily complex. Having a large number of legislative neophytes in the chamber can lead to legislation rife with contradictions and errors—as was evident in the last-minute changes the Republicans scrawled into a recent tax bill—and can increase the influence of lobbyists as legislators lack the expertise needed to evaluate requests. Similarly, amateur legislators might not have the institutional knowledge to fight adequately for constituents and preferred policy. Better understanding how these new types of candidates are representing their constituents and their legislative behavior more broadly, is an area ripe for future research.

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