



Inexperienced candidates are becoming more common, but only in one party

Republicans are electing more inexperienced candidates than they used to, and more than Democrats.

By Sarah Treul and Rachel Porter | Apr 20, 2018, 4:10pm EDT



Kevin Winter/Getty

MISCHIEFS OF FACTION

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What if I told you that the pilot for your next flight never landed a plane before, or that the lifeguard watching your child in the pool does not know how to swim? Choosing someone without experience over someone with experience to perform a task can have serious consequences. Yet, the American electorate is increasingly infatuated with inexperienced candidates for political office.

President Donald Trump capitalized on this, trumpeting the need for a “**Washington outsider**” to fix what ails Washington. He successfully convinced the electorate that the best solution to solving what troubles government is to elect someone with no experience in government.

This love affair with inexperienced candidates is a relatively new phenomenon. In fact, if there was such a thing as an accepted truth in the political science literature on candidate success, it was that candidates with previous experience in elective office perform better in elections than those with no **experience**.

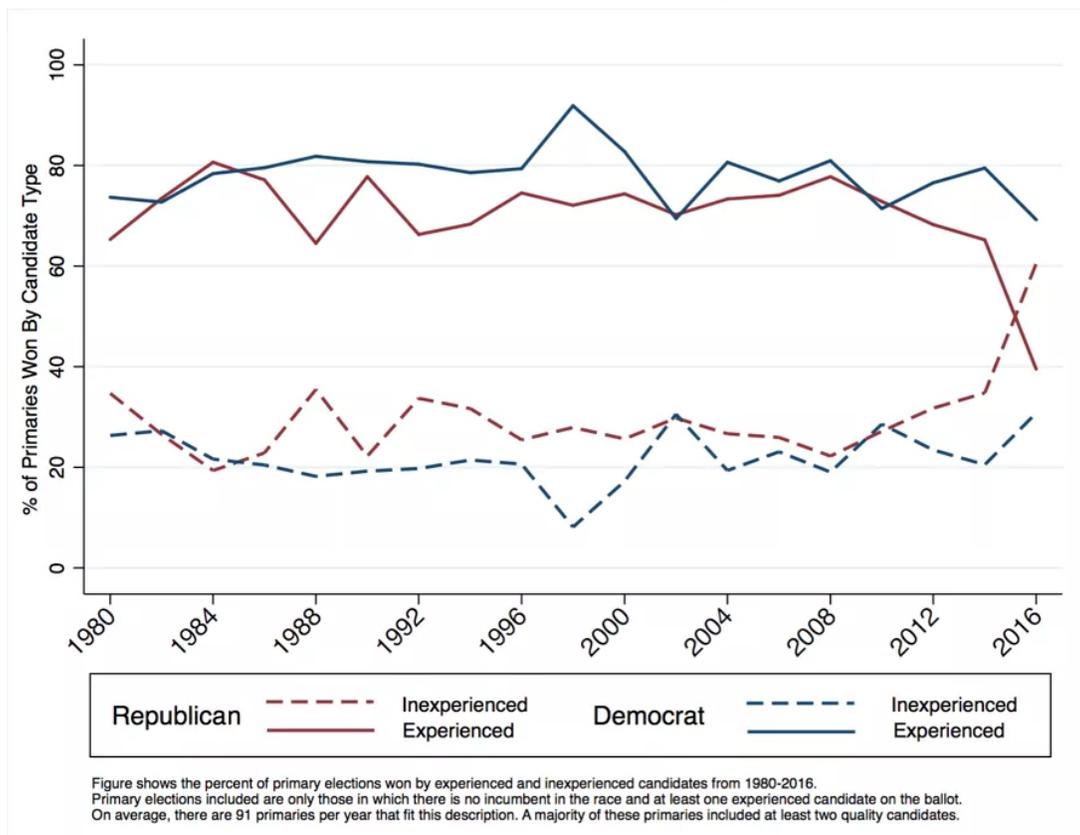
President Trump's election cemented the fact that an inexperienced candidate can win at any level of government, but the favoring of inexperienced candidates is not just a Trump phenomenon. It was, however, in vogue with one party more than another in 2016. Our research shows that in 2016, Republican voters were more inclined to support inexperienced candidates.

IN 2016, AN INEXPERIENCED CANDIDATE WON 60 PERCENT OF REPUBLICAN PRIMARIES FOR OPEN SEATS

In an effort to better understand the role of political experience on candidate success, we coded the occupations of all primary candidates in the US House of Representatives from 1980 to 2016. The first graph presented here exclusively examines open seats, as it is still very much the case that when an incumbent officeholder runs, she wins.

As past theories of candidate success would predict, we find that from 1980 to 2012 candidates with political experience fared better than those without experience, winning races well over 60 percent of the time. This was true in all election years and across political parties.

However, this consistent trend shifted dramatically in 2016. That year, an inexperienced candidate won 60 percent of Republican primaries for open seats. This means that in Republican primaries without an incumbent on the ballot, voters prefer inexperienced candidates to those with past careers in elective office. For comparison, in 2016, just 30 percent of inexperienced candidates beat out experienced candidates in Democratic open seat primaries

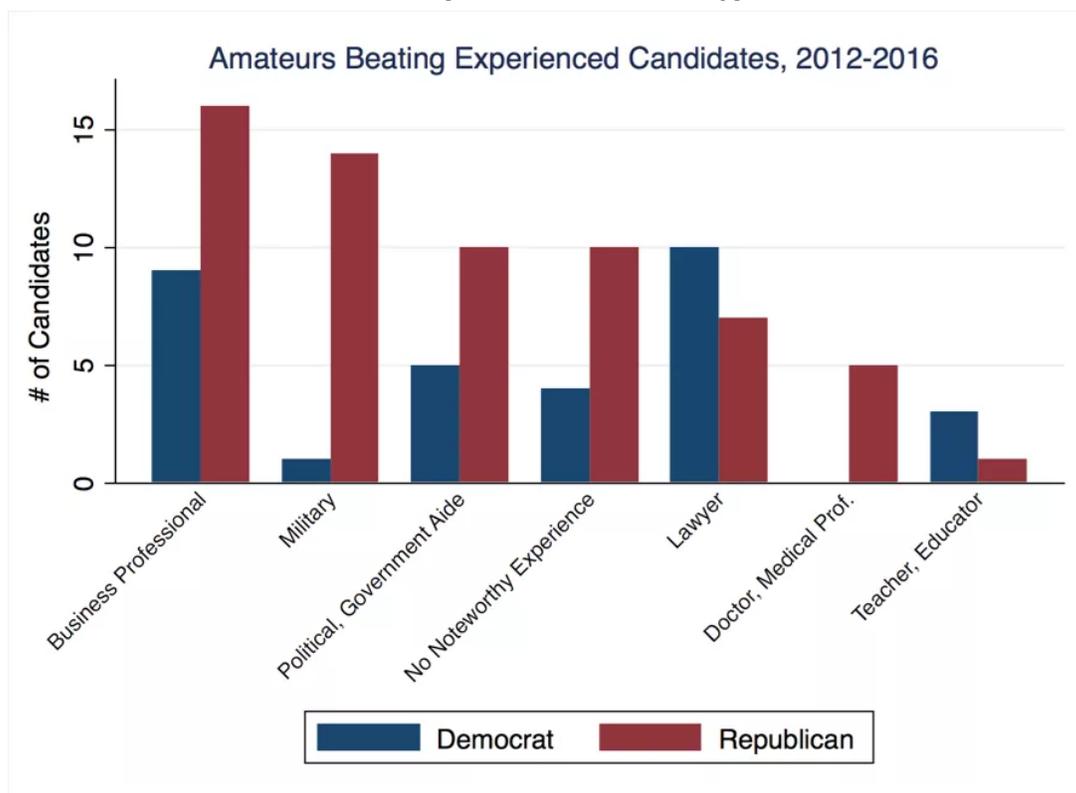


Percent of primaries won by winning candidates, 1980 to 2016. Data collected by authors. | Sarah Treul and Rachel Porter

Although the first graph makes it clear that Democratic voters and Republican voters are evaluating their candidates differently, we need to dig a bit deeper to assess what types of inexperienced candidates Republican voters prefer. In the second graph, we break down the inexperienced candidates into groups we call “preferred amateurs” and “true amateurs.”

Preferred amateurs are those candidates who, despite not having experience in elected office, are somehow connected to the law and government. This classification includes lawyers and non-elected government positions such as an aide, local party leader, or appointed judge.

The figure shows that for the years 2010 to 2016, successful Republican amateur candidates are not what we would classify as “preferred amateurs,” but rather are “true amateurs” with no government experience whatsoever. Most of the successful amateur candidates are those with a military background, business professionals, or another category altogether that we classify as “no noteworthy experience.” The former occupations of candidates in this category include a **PhD in clinical psychology** and a **radio talk show host**.



Candidates by experience and party, 2012 to 2016. Data collected by authors. | Sarah Treul and Rachel Porter

In 2016, many Republican voters showed their willingness to support inexperienced candidates. Yet there is evidence that Democratic voters are not immune to this particular strain of political plagiarism. The percentage of races won by amateurs in the Democratic primaries was at an all-time high in 2016.

Further, Democrats continue to show signs of being wooed by inexperience. There was palpable excitement in some quarters for a **presidential run by Oprah Winfrey**. **Cynthia Nixon**, most famous for her role on *Sex and the City*, has emerged to face New York's Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo in a primary election.

It is unclear how serious to take these Democratic dalliances. Winfrey stamped out speculation about a presidential run. (Her "You get a car" campaign theme would likely not have played well with the environmental wing of the party!) And Nixon's candidacy has not exactly been embraced in **some Democratic circles**. Former New York City Council Speaker of the House and mayoral candidate Christine Quinn infamously referred to her as an "**unqualified lesbian**."

Even if Democrats manage to resist being taken over by the celebrity wing of their party, one thing remains to be seen: How problematic is inexperience for the functioning of American institutions? If the current administration and the missteps of **Betsy DeVos** and

Ben Carson are any indication, an additional influx of inexperience could make our governing problems more acute as political leaders struggle to learn on the job.

Most of us would fear for our lives if an inexperienced pilot was at the helm of a modern jet, why should we not fear for the future of our country if the institutions are routinely captained by inexperienced leaders?

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