

Dropout Decisions in U.S. House Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines dropout decisions in congressional elections from 1980 to 2016. I draw on a new dataset of U.S. House candidates who were voted on in the primary and individuals who initiated a candidacy but were not on the ballot. First, I find that candidates with previous political experience are more likely to drop out than inexperienced candidates. I also use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to analyze dropout patterns among those who ran for state legislative and congressional office, and the estimates indicate that previous officeholders are more likely to drop out than those who were nearly elected to lower-level office but lost. Second, I show that dropout rates have increased in recent years as the cost of running for Congress has soared. Experienced candidates are especially likely to drop out as the fundraising gap to victory widens. The findings uncover a new way in which the influx of money in American elections diminishes political competition, and they have implications for the choices available to voters.

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Competition among candidates or parties is a necessary condition for democracy (Dahl 1956, 1971; Key 1949; Schumpeter 1942). The competitive struggle for the people's vote is so central to our understanding of democratic government that the outcomes of elections—who wins and who loses—have, mostly implicitly, come to dominate our depictions of the state of electoral competition. Scholars have relied on vote totals, electoral margins, and reelection rates to examine whether voters are able to hold their elected officials accountable, whether incumbents are rewarded or punished for past performance, and why incumbents win so often in American elections (i.e., Abramowitz 1991; Achen and Bartels 2016; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Erikson 1972; Ferejohn 1977; Fiorina 1981; Jacobson 1989; Kramer 1971; Mayhew 1974). It is almost exclusively through the lens of the ballot that scholars have evaluated the nature and quality of competition over the short and long run.

As a result, we know a lot about electoral dynamics among those who have been voted on by an electorate, but the ballot-centered view has also disguised the range of competition and hindered our understanding of the forces that shape patterns of candidate entry and exit. Running for office consists of many stages and parts. Prospective candidates gauge their support, file to become a candidate, raise money, and try to appeal to voters. They also respond to the decisions of others who enter and exit the race (Fowler 1993; King 2017). Some will ultimately appear on the ballot, although not all who file to become candidates are voted on by an electorate. The pool of potential candidates and ambitious politicians is small throughout the campaign cycle, but it is winnowed even further by Election Day. Virtually all of our analyses of electoral competition are based on those who appear on the ballot. However, those who initiate a candidacy but drop out before the election offer a window into how competition might have looked instead.

This paper departs from the on-ballot measure of a political candidate. The main argument is that we have a pinched understanding of electoral competition in elections precisely because of our measures of a candidate. I use a new dataset of U.S. House candidates who were voted on in the primary and individuals who initiated a candidacy but were not on the ballot. The on-ballot measure of a candidate obscures two regularities in patterns of candidate entry that have important implications for elections. First, I find that candidates with previous political experience are more likely to drop out than those without experience. Experienced candidates are more likely to drop out even when no other experienced candidates are in the race. I also use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to analyze dropout patterns among those who ran for both state legislative and congressional office, and the estimates similarly indicate that previous officeholders are more likely to drop out than those who were nearly elected to lower-level office but lost. Second, I show that dropout rates have increased in recent years, and experienced candidates are especially likely to exit the race as the fundraising gap to victory widens.

The findings have consequences for the choices available to voters and the quality of legislative representation. The final section puts dropout decisions in a broader context and explores the prevalence of dropouts in congressional races and their impact on elections. I also illustrate what the makeup of primary competitors ultimately looked like in races where experienced candidates dropped out. In nearly one-third of primaries with an experienced dropout and no same-party incumbent, there were zero experienced candidates on the ballot. In half of primaries with an experienced dropout and an opposite-party incumbent, there was no experienced candidate on the ballot. Given that candidates with previous political experience are more likely to win and more likely to be effective legislators (i.e., Jacobson 1989; Porter and Treul 2018; Volden and Wiseman 2014), the exit of these individuals has particularly meaningful

implications for election outcomes and political representation. On the one hand, the state of competition looks more vibrant when we broaden our definition of a political candidate; yet at the same time, the disproportionate exit of experienced political candidates in recent years has negative consequences for the range of choices on the ballot.

Measuring Political Candidacies

Scholars have rarely traced the trajectory of political candidacies beyond the ballot. Fowler and McClure (1989) conducted a case study of the 1984 U.S. House race in New York's 30th congressional district. They interviewed 60 leading political players in the district, including “unseen candidates”—individuals who could have run for Congress but chose not to—as well as party leaders, interest group officials, and the eventual contenders. They trace how political ambitions change over time and in response to others, offering a rare look into the decisions of political elites throughout the campaign cycle. Kazee's (1994) edited volume builds on this approach with a series of case studies of nine U.S. House districts in the 1992 cycle, in which a leading group of political scientists documented the pool of potential and actual candidates in each district. King (2017) analyzes the newspaper coverage of potential and actual candidates for the U.S. Senate and shows that many individuals were active during the campaign but did not appear on the ballot. Scholars associated with the UCLA School have generated new interest in how parties influence candidate nominations well before the primary, and they have similarly broadened our view of how pre-nomination activity influences the makeup of competitors (Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008; Dominguez 2011; Masket 2009; Hassell 2018).

All of these studies highlight the dynamic nature of patterns of candidate entry, yet virtually no attention is given to the concept and measurement of a candidacy. The problem of measurement becomes particularly salient for those conducting quantitative analyses, but it is of

significant theoretical concern as well. Implicit in the study of elections is that more candidates are better for the quality of political competition, but is a candidate only a candidate if they are voted on by an electorate? How does the on-ballot measure of a candidate restrict our view or hinder our assessment of electoral competition? We know little about how those who drop out differ from those who remain in the race, and perhaps most critically, how the possible makeup of competitors differs from the actual makeup of competitors. If dropouts differ systematically from those who are voted on by an electorate, this has consequences for the quality of political competition. Moreover, even if individuals are not voted on by an electorate, they may shape the course of the election, raise new issues, and even alter issue positions held by the incumbent or other candidates in the race. If we only look at those who appear on the ballot, we miss the individuals who are competing in various capacities at different stages of the candidacy process.

We can think about a political candidacy as a string of events or a series of hurdles. There is a selection effect at multiple stages, and the pool of ambitious individuals is winnowed throughout the candidacy process. Although a sizeable number of individuals have political ambition, very few of them will ever appear on the primary or general election ballot. In the early stages of a candidacy, ambitious individuals survey the political field, consult with party leaders and activists, assess their level of support, and weigh the costs and benefits of running for and serving in elected office. Those who decide to continue file the requisite paperwork to run for office and announce their candidacy to the media and public. Those who are still undeterred must lay the groundwork for a campaign. For the most viable contenders, this includes raising money, hiring staff and campaign professionals, and finding volunteers to canvass the district. At each stage, some individuals drop out and others remain, in part due to the choices of other

contenders and potential contenders (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Fowler 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; King 2017).

One reason we may want to adopt a broader conception of a candidacy is that those who are not on the ballot may nonetheless affect competition and representation. Political scientists have given little attention to how issues raised on the campaign trail influence the behavior of legislators or other candidates in the race. Sulkin's (2005) work is an important exception. She develops a theory of "issue uptake" and shows how legislators incorporate the issues prioritized by challengers in the previous election into their own legislative agendas. While Sulkin (2005) focuses on challengers in the general election, the same expectations could apply to those who initiated a candidacy but were not voted on by an electorate, particularly if they would have been formidable competitors. On-ballot measures of a candidate overlook these individuals altogether and lead us to an incomplete assessment of competition. Indeed, the studies highlighted above that do adopt a broader view of candidate entry all share the view that those who are not ultimately listed on the ballot still shape how the contest unfolds. The traditional snapshot measurement of a candidacy—appearing on the ballot—does not allow us to study the full arc of contestation or the full range of competition.

Another reason we might want to broaden our measurement of a candidacy is that those who drop out may differ systematically from those who remain in the race. Individuals with previous political experience have the most to lose professionally by seeking elective office, which is why they enter races strategically (i.e., Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Experienced candidates have held lower-level office, and many sitting elected officials have to give up their current position in order to seek higher office. In addition, they have likely reached some degree of success in their private lives, and they may incur greater financial losses by putting their

careers on hold. Members of Congress earn more than most Americans, but the salary is probably less than many of them made before they held office (Carnes 2013). Finally, candidates and elected officials are under constant scrutiny, and their private lives are opened up to the public. Experienced candidates who have spent years cultivating their public persona may place a higher premium on reputational factors than inexperienced candidates.

More to the point, the utility of running for office may change in different ways for experienced and inexperienced candidates during the course of the campaign. Being on the ballot may become less desirable or more costly for experienced candidates in particular. Precisely because they are more viable, experienced candidates may be promised future support or another position in exchange for dropping out. Some may even plan to drop out if they intend to run more seriously in the future, and they may simply wish to introduce themselves to the public but not suffer from a loss. What is more, the experience of running for office may have worsened in recent years as the costs of campaigning have soared. The unexpected involvement of outside groups could make running for higher office increasingly unappealing, particularly for those who have alternative career options. If experienced candidates are more likely to drop out than those without political experience, we may be systematically overlooking individuals who would have the largest effect on competition.

One of the main obstacles to this line of research is data collection, as it is difficult to find information on those who could have run for office and did not and those who declared a candidacy but dropped out before the election. It is also challenging to assess the substantive impact of those who never emerge on the ballot and identify the ways in which they might matter for electoral outcomes. Yet given the fundamental role that electoral contestation plays in democratic politics, it seems worthwhile to examine the determinants of dropout patterns and

consider who the on-ballot measure of a candidate misses or overlooks. In addition, the makeup of dropouts provides insight into how competition *almost* looked, which differs from other studies of underrepresented groups that consider why some potentially good candidates have not considered running for office or do not run (i.e., Lawless and Fox 2010; Carnes 2018). Scholars have long bemoaned the decline in electoral competition, and dropouts offer a unique window into how election outcomes might have been different. The question of who counts as a candidate has important implications for the quality of competition in American elections as well as the makeup of legislative institutions.

Data

The analysis focuses on dropouts in races for the U.S. House from 1980 to 2016. To examine dropout patterns, we need to define a set of individuals who initiated a candidacy but withdrew before the election. Dropouts here include those who filed to run with the Federal Election Commission and raised money but did not appear on the primary ballot.¹ One advantage of this measure is that these individuals have taken a costly step of running for office. Filing with the FEC and raising money conveys to the public and other competitors that the individual not only intends to run but also intends to be a viable candidate.² This measure thus captures some of

¹ Another option was to look at those who filed paperwork to run within their respective states, but this was less desirable for several reasons. First, most states do not keep historical records of the candidates who filed to run for office. Second, filing records are stored at the county level in some cases and at the state level in others. New York, for example, retains their records for two years after the election, and New Yorkers who file to run in congressional districts that fall within a single county do so at the county level while those in districts that cross county borders file at the state level. Third, differences in filing deadlines across states means that the pool of filers in states with earlier deadlines is likely to be larger and more reflective of the pool of FEC filers than the pool of filers in states with later deadlines as some may have decided to exit the race by that point. The pool of FEC filers thus provides the best opportunity to examine this pool of individuals more systematically across states and over time.

² Candidates who raise more than \$5,000 are required to file with the FEC, and this law has been in place since 1979. Not all who file meet the threshold, but the act of filing conveys an intention to do so. The

the more serious contenders who competed in what scholars have called the invisible primary, or the action between candidates and party insiders before the primary election. It excludes other individuals who initiated a candidacy in another way but did not appear on the ballot, but the increasing importance of money in elections makes fundraising an appropriate starting point.

I draw on two datasets to generate the dropouts and on-ballot candidates. First, I use Bonica's (2014) data to identify the candidates who filed with the FEC and raised money.³ Second, I collected the full sample of on-ballot primary candidates from 1980 to 2016 from the America Votes series and the FEC website and added the DIME identifier to each candidate. There are 27,978 on-ballot candidates, 20,398 of which are non-incumbents, and the data include regular and special elections. The dropouts are those who are in the FEC filers dataset but not the on-ballot candidate dataset.⁴ The political experience of the dropouts was obtained from Newsbank and online searches. Pettigrew, Owen, and Wanless (2014), Hassell (2018), and Porter and Treul (2018) generously provided or made publicly available measures of the political backgrounds of on-ballot primary candidates from 2000 to 2010, from 2004 to 2014, and from 1980 to 1988, respectively. Jacobson (2018) generously shared background data of general election candidates for this entire period. I collected background data for the remaining years and for the candidates in which the coding differed across datasets. All of these followed Jacobson's (1989) measure of experience, which is whether the individual held previous elected office.

FEC filers who raise no money and drop out are excluded as they are unlikely to be perceived as credible threats. In fact, it is unclear whether party elites and other candidates are even aware of their existence.

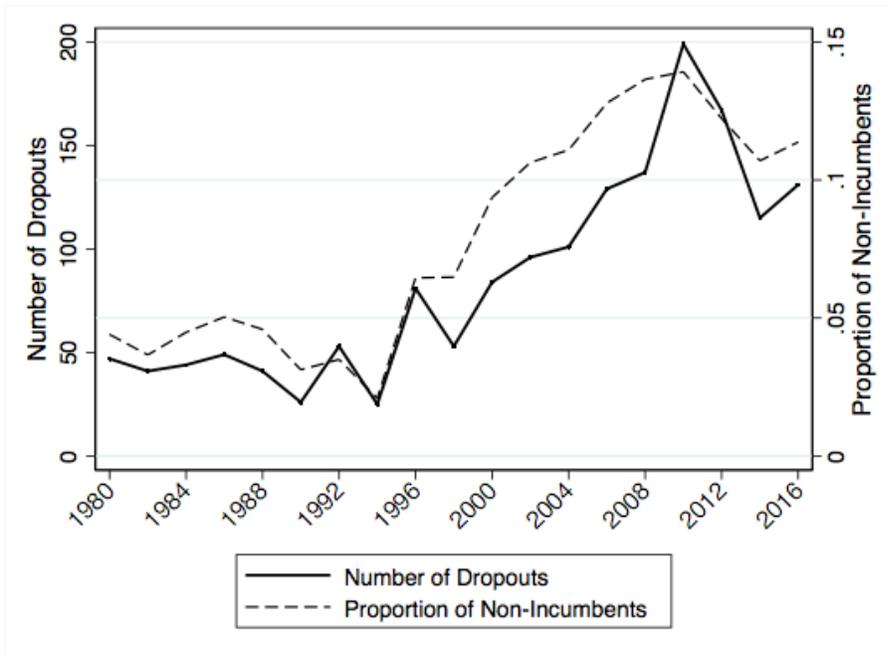
³ The analysis is limited to Republicans and Democrats. Also, I used FEC data to generate the filers in 2016 rather than Bonica's data due to data availability when the data were collected.

⁴ Incumbent members of Congress who filed with the FEC but retired before the primary are not considered dropouts. Retirement is conceptually different from non-incumbents who decide not to run. The number of dropouts is larger than Hassell's (2018) dataset of dropouts as his dataset is limited to candidates who received support from party donors in at least two quarters.

The size of dropouts as a category varies depending on how dropouts are measured. The measurement here of those who filed with the FEC and raised money but were not on the ballot results in a total of 1,619 dropouts from 1980 to 2016, which is 7.9 percent of the number of non-incumbents.⁵ However, the number of dropouts has varied significantly during this time period. Changes in the number of dropouts and dropouts as a proportion of non-incumbents are shown in Figure 1. The number of dropouts has ranged from a low of 25 in 1994 to a high of 199 in 2010, and dropouts as a proportion of non-incumbents has ranged from 2.1 percent in 1994 to 13.9 percent in 2010. Yet it is clear that the trend is increasing over time, which provides additional motivation for why we might want to look at these individuals more closely. Of course, these figures would be higher if we included those who considered running but did not take this costly step of raising money, but the appeal of focusing on these individuals is they have an ability to shape the dynamics of the race in ways that most potential candidates do not.

⁵ Of these, 503 are in open seats and 1,116 are in districts with an incumbent. In the 1,116 districts with an incumbent, 291 are same-party incumbents and 825 are opposite-party incumbents.

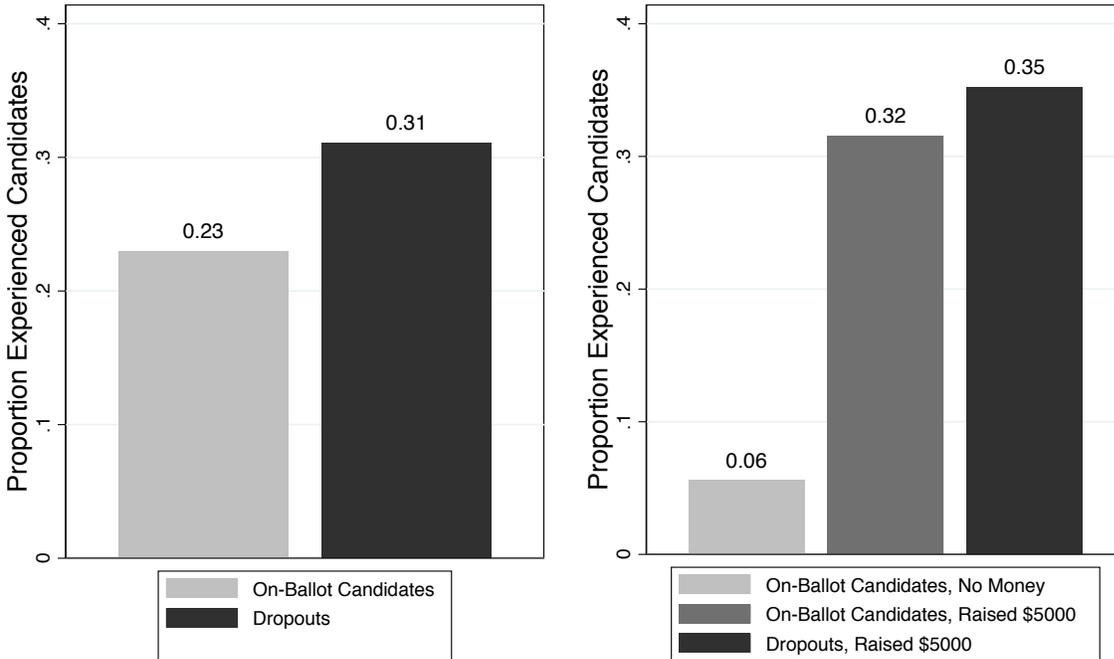
Figure 1: Increase in Dropouts Over Time, 1980-2016



Source: Dropouts are those who filed with the FEC and raised money but were not on the ballot (Bonica 2014). On-ballot candidates were collected from the America Votes series and the FEC.

We are also interested in whether dropouts differ from on-ballot candidates on key dimensions that matter for election outcomes and legislative representation. The main consideration is whether there are differences in the previous political experience of dropouts and on-ballot candidates. The comparison of dropouts with on-ballot candidates is shown in the left panel of Figure 2, and the comparison of dropouts with on-ballot candidates who raised money is shown in the right panel. We can see that dropouts are more likely to have previous political experience than on-ballot candidates. In the full sample, 31 percent of dropouts have held previous elected office, compared to 23 percent of non-incumbent on-ballot candidates ($p < 0.01$). Among those who raised at least \$5,000, the gap is smaller but dropouts are still more likely to have held previous elected office ($p < 0.01$).

Figure 2: Dropouts are More Experienced than On-Ballot Candidates



Source: Dropouts are those who filed with the FEC and raised money but were not on the ballot (Bonica 2014). On-ballot candidates were collected from the America Votes series and the FEC. Background data are from Hassell (2014), Jacobson (2018), Pettigrew et al. (2014), and Porter and Treul (2018).

Similarly, the dropout rate for experienced non-incumbent candidates is higher than that for inexperienced candidates. In the full sample, 10 percent of experienced candidates dropped out, on average, compared to 7 percent of inexperienced candidates ($p < 0.01$). Though not shown here, I also looked at whether this pattern differs by seat type. Experienced candidates are more likely to drop out both in open seats and when they run as challengers. The overall proportion of experienced candidates is higher in open seats, which conforms to previous research, but the difference is evident across seat type.

The next section further examines the relationship between political experience and the decision to drop out. The dependent variable is whether the individual initiated a candidacy but withdrew before the primary or was on the ballot. The main independent variable is whether the

individual held previous elected office. The analyses are limited to primaries with no same-party incumbent because experienced candidates rarely choose to challenge an incumbent in a primary (Jacobson and Kernell 1983).⁶ The analyses are broken down by district type, with favorable districts measured as those with more than 55 percent of the presidential vote, competitive districts as those between 45 and 55 percent, and unfavorable districts as those with less than 45 percent of the presidential vote. I also analyze these relationships over time to see if dropout patterns differ between the 1980s and the 2000s in light of the increased financial costs of campaigning in recent elections.

I control for several electoral and institutional factors that affect primary outcomes and candidate entry. I include the number of primary candidates in the race and this number squared, as the probability of dropping out is likely to increase when there are more candidates in the race but decrease as this number grows. I account for seat type and the state and party rules governing preprimary endorsements, which have been shown to reduce primary competition (Canon 1993; Herrnson and Gimpel 1995; Jewell and Morehouse 2001). The number of House seats in a state as well as the number of state legislators may matter for the opportunities that are available and the supply of potential candidates. Jacobson's measures of presidential vote share are used to measure the partisan favorability of the district. I also account for candidate gender, party, her share of district receipts, and the number of previous congressional bids. I incorporate Bonica's (2014) measures of ideology in some of the analyses, but about one-fourth of on-ballot candidates do not have CFscores so the sample size diminishes as a result. Lastly, year fixed effects are included to account for differences in the electoral environment across years.

⁶ However, the results remain the same when all non-incumbents are included in the models.

The Decision to Drop Out

This section examines the relationship between candidate experience and the decision to drop out. The results are presented in Table 1. The full sample is shown in Column 1. The model in Column 2 includes Bonica's CFscores, with higher values corresponding to moderate ideology. In Columns 3-5, the sample is broken down by district partisanship. Across models, experienced candidates are more likely to drop out than those without previous political experience. The coefficients do not differ much by district type, which is likely a reflection of the fact that these individuals have already taken the initial steps to launch a candidacy. For experienced candidates, the predicted probability of dropping out of a House race is approximately double what it is for those without previous political experience, all else equal (6.3 and 3.2 percent, respectively).

Table 1: Experienced Candidates Are More Likely to Drop Out Than Inexperienced Candidates, Across District Type

	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) Competitive	(4) Favorable	(5) Unfavorable
Previous Political Experience	0.72** (0.08)	0.52** (0.08)	0.73** (0.12)	0.81** (0.14)	0.59** (0.13)
Number of Primary Candidates	0.31** (0.05)	0.33** (0.06)	0.29* (0.13)	-0.00 (0.07)	0.82** (0.15)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03† (0.01)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.09** (0.02)
Open Seat	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.10)	-0.08 (0.16)	0.39* (0.19)	0.14 (0.14)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.65** (0.05)	0.56** (0.06)	0.49** (0.10)	0.70** (0.12)	0.70** (0.09)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01† (0.00)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.02** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.03** (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)	0.05* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.05** (0.01)
Share of District Receipts	-0.11** (0.01)	-0.16** (0.01)	-0.13** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)
Number of Times Run	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.15* (0.07)	-0.28* (0.12)	-0.06 (0.05)
Female	0.01 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.10)	0.05 (0.14)	-0.00 (0.18)	-0.06 (0.15)
Republican	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.18* (0.08)	-0.11 (0.12)	-0.19 (0.17)	0.03 (0.11)
Moderate	—	0.17** (0.05)	—	—	—
Constant	-4.96** (0.30)	-3.64** (0.36)	-5.88** (1.16)	-2.26** (0.82)	-7.00** (0.54)
Observations	18,314	12,722	5,341	4,748	8,225

Note: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by primary race in parentheses. **p<0.01, *p<0.05, †p<0.10.

These patterns may reflect the fact that experienced candidates are dropping out in response to the entry or success of other similarly experienced candidates, so we also want to analyze the likelihood of dropping out for experienced candidates when no other experienced candidates are in the race. These results are shown in Table 2. Experienced candidates are more likely to drop out than inexperienced candidates even when there are no other experienced candidates in the race. The coefficient is positive in competitive and favorable partisan districts, but the relationship is not significant. In none of the models are experienced candidates less likely to drop out even when no other experienced candidates are in the race. It may be tempting to dismiss these results as unsurprising because experienced candidates have more at stake than inexperienced candidates. Yet within the traditional strategic candidate entry framework, it is puzzling why they entered at all because macroeconomic indicators and levels of presidential approval change minimally within a cycle. These dropout patterns suggest that the utility of running for office can evolve in important yet understudied ways, and in different ways for experienced and inexperienced candidates, during the course of the campaign itself.

Table 2: Experienced Candidates Are More Likely to Drop Out in Races with No Other Experienced Candidates

	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) Competitive	(4) Favorable	(5) Unfavorable
Previous Political Experience	0.42** (0.13)	0.40** (0.14)	0.32 (0.24)	0.46 (0.41)	0.45* (0.19)
Number of Primary Candidates	1.18** (0.22)	1.19** (0.28)	1.38** (0.32)	1.94** (0.42)	0.97** (0.32)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.15** (0.04)	-0.15** (0.05)	-0.18** (0.05)	-0.25** (0.06)	-0.12* (0.05)
Open Seat	-0.03 (0.15)	-0.17 (0.17)	0.00 (0.29)	0.31 (0.36)	-0.04 (0.21)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.63** (0.08)	0.53** (0.09)	0.55** (0.16)	0.80** (0.27)	0.61** (0.11)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01† (0.01)	-0.03† (0.01)	-0.01 (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.04** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.05** (0.02)	0.06** (0.03)	0.04* (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.03** (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.04** (0.01)
Share of District Receipts	-0.09** (0.01)	-0.13** (0.01)	-0.12** (0.02)	-0.11** (0.02)	-0.07** (0.01)
Number of Times Run	-0.11† (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.23* (0.10)	-0.22 (0.29)	-0.05 (0.07)
Female	0.14 (0.13)	0.07 (0.15)	0.09 (0.23)	0.53 (0.51)	0.06 (0.17)
Republican	0.09 (0.10)	-0.13 (0.11)	0.17 (0.18)	-0.16 (0.41)	0.08 (0.14)
Moderate	—	0.14 (0.09)	—	—	—
Constant	-6.95** (0.51)	-5.04** (0.61)	-7.38** (1.96)	-6.75** (2.00)	-7.20** (0.75)
Observations	10,915	7,488	2,981	1,393	6,480

Note: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by primary race in parentheses. **p<0.01, *p<0.05, †p<0.10.

With respect to the controls, the likelihood of dropping out increases as the number of candidates in the primary increases but this relationship is nonlinear. Preprimary endorsement rules are also associated with higher dropout rates, which is consistent with previous research. The number of state legislators and the number of congressional seats in a state are related to dropout decisions in most of the models. An increase in the number of times that candidates have run decreases the likelihood of dropping out, and individuals who raise a larger share of district receipts are much less likely to drop out as well. The probability of exiting the race is higher in favorable partisan districts where competition is likely to be greater (Stone and Maisel 2003). In the models with ideology, moderates are more likely to drop out than those at the extremes, but this relationship is only significant in recent years (see Table 4). Given that moderates are less likely to run than ideologues in the first place, it may be an especially uphill battle to elect centrists to Congress today (Thomsen 2014, 2017).

Officeholding vs. Individual Attributes

It is unclear whether officeholding itself is behind this heightened dropout rate or whether this difference is driven by the qualities or characteristics of individuals who tend to be elected to lower-level office. To shed some light on this distinction, I use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to examine a subset of congressional candidates who ran for both state legislative and congressional office. The basic logic is to compare individuals who were elected and gained experience to those who were almost elected but did not gain office experience. RDDs have become increasingly common in the study of elections because they allow for an as-if random assignment of the treatment variable (see, for example, Eggers et al. 2015; Hall 2015; Hall and Snyder 2015; Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004). The number of observations decreases significantly

from the analyses above, but we can nevertheless leverage these data to understand more about the effect of political experience on dropout rates.

I used Klarner's (2018) dataset of state legislative general election candidates from 1980 to 2016 and merged them with non-incumbent congressional candidates to identify individuals who ran for both state legislative and congressional office.⁷ I analyze dropout patterns among candidates who won or lost their state legislative race prior to running for Congress. To examine the relationship between political experience and the decision to drop out of a U.S. House race, I run models of the following form:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{StateLegislativeWinner} + \beta_2 \text{VictoryMargin} + \beta_3 \text{Winner} * \text{VictoryMargin} + \varepsilon_i$$

where Y is the candidate's decision to drop out, $\text{StateLegislativeWinner}$ is whether the candidate won the state legislative race prior to her congressional bid and VictoryMargin is her margin of victory in the state legislative race. Thus, β_1 is the quantity of interest, the RDD estimator for the local average treatment effect of previous political experience. Following recent studies, the equation is estimated with local linear regression at different bandwidths.

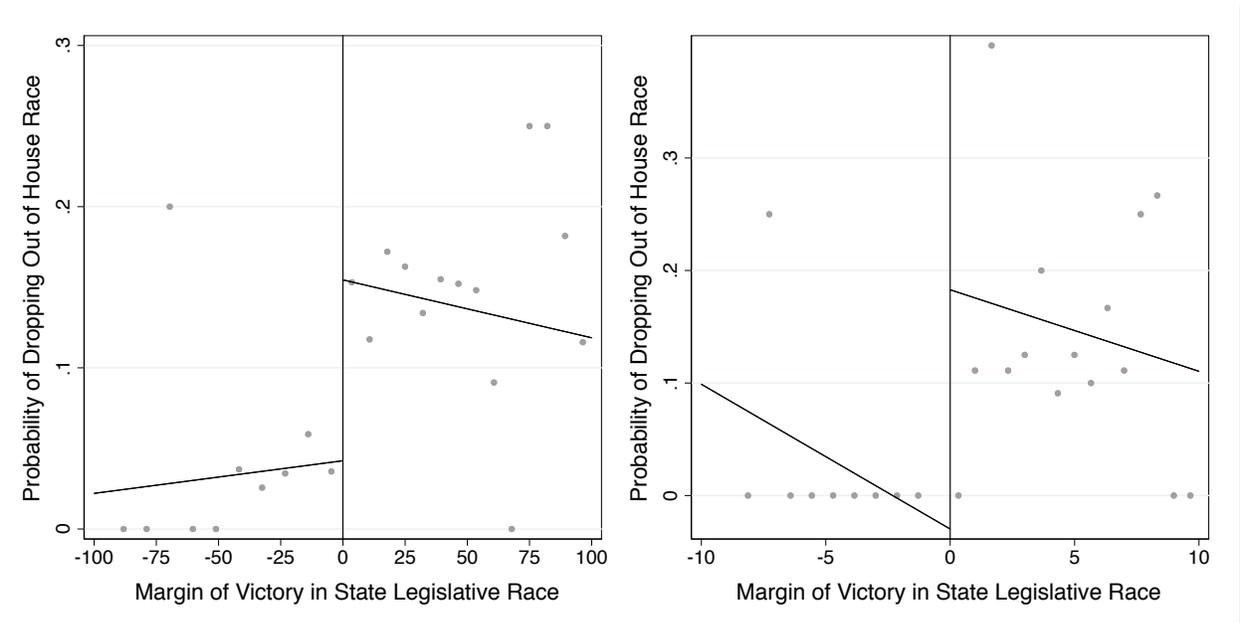
The results are presented in Figure 3; the estimates are also provided in the Appendix.⁸ Those who were elected to the state legislature are on the right side of the cutoff, and those who were not elected to office are on the left side. The left panel includes the full sample of candidates ($n=1,243$). The right panel further narrows the sample to state legislative candidates

⁷ I first merged Klarner's data with Bonica's data of state legislative candidates on name, state, district, and year to attach the DIME unique identifier to each state legislative candidate. I then merged the state legislative candidates with the congressional candidate data on the DIME unique identifier.

⁸ Graphs were created with the `rdrobust` package (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014). Also excluded from the models are losers who had held another elected office prior to their run for the U.S. House as the purpose is to examine the difference between officeholders and non-officeholders.

who won or lost the general election by less than ten percentage points in the state legislative race prior to their congressional bid (n=182). This subset is particularly important as those on the right side of the cutoff were elected to office and those on the left side lost but nearly won.

Figure 3: Effect of Political Experience on the Decision to Drop Out



Note: The graphs include candidates who ran for the state legislature and the U.S. House. Those on the right side of the cutoff were elected to the state legislature, and those on the left side ran for the state legislature but lost. The right graph is limited to those who won or lost the state legislative election by less than ten points.

We can see in both graphs in Figure 3 that the probability of dropping out is higher for candidates with state legislative experience (right side of cutoff) than for those who ran for the state legislature but did not hold elected office (left side of cutoff; $p < 0.01$). When we look at close winners and losers in the right panel, the likelihood of dropping out remains significantly higher for those who were elected to state legislative office than for those who lost but nearly won. I also ran a series of regressions at each bandwidth between 5 and 20, and the estimate for β_1 is statistically significant at bandwidths above 5 (see Figure A1). The difference between near

winners and actual winners suggests that there is something about officeholding itself that matters for dropout rates. It is unclear what the specific mechanism is, but the disparity may reflect the ample career options that officeholders have that losing candidates do not, the opportunity costs associated with giving up a lower-level office, or an increased awareness of how much donor support is necessary to win a House race. The next section delves into one of these mechanisms—the rising price tag of a congressional victory in recent years.

Campaign Finance and Experienced Dropouts

The increase in congressional dropouts noted at the outset suggests that the electoral context has changed since the 1980s, and we can leverage the over-time data here to better understand why experienced candidates are dropping out. In Table 3, the sample is split into three periods—1980-1988, 1990-1998, and 2000-2016—to examine dropout patterns during this time. We can see that experienced candidates are more likely to drop out than inexperienced candidates across years, but the coefficient is much larger in the 2000s. The probability of dropping out for inexperienced candidates increased from 1.9 percent in the 1980s to 6.0 percent in the 2000s. By comparison, the likelihood of dropping out for experienced candidates increased by more than four times from the 1980s to the 2000s, from 2.9 percent to 12.9 percent.

Table 3: Relationship between Political Experience and Dropping Out, By Decade

	1980-1988		1990-1998		2000-2016	
	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) All	(4) Ideology	(5) All	(6) Ideology
Previous Political Experience	0.42† (0.23)	0.04 (0.26)	0.50* (0.21)	0.37 (0.23)	0.81** (0.09)	0.61** (0.10)
Number of Primary Candidates	0.40* (0.19)	0.30* (0.14)	0.46* (0.18)	0.35† (0.19)	0.29** (0.05)	0.36** (0.06)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.03** (0.00)	-0.03** (0.01)
Open Seat	0.08 (0.23)	-0.08 (0.27)	0.09 (0.20)	0.05 (0.24)	-0.13 (0.12)	-0.15 (0.12)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.86** (0.13)	0.67** (0.16)	0.84** (0.12)	0.78** (0.13)	0.59** (0.07)	0.50** (0.07)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.02** (0.01)	0.02† (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.03** (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)
Share of District Receipts	-0.10** (0.01)	-0.18** (0.03)	-0.13** (0.02)	-0.19** (0.03)	-0.12** (0.01)	-0.16** (0.01)
Number of Times Run	-0.80** (0.29)	-0.63* (0.30)	-0.18† (0.10)	-0.07 (0.12)	-0.08† (0.04)	-0.03 (0.05)
Female	-0.14 (0.27)	-0.08 (0.37)	0.29 (0.21)	0.06 (0.25)	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.11)
Republican	-0.05 (0.18)	0.01 (0.24)	0.35† (0.18)	-0.13 (0.21)	-0.14† (0.08)	-0.19* (0.09)
Moderate	—	0.19 (0.16)	—	0.03 (0.13)	—	0.19** (0.06)
Constant	-3.96** (0.65)	-2.41** (0.71)	-5.55** (0.62)	-4.45** (0.73)	-4.20** (0.28)	-3.21** (0.31)
Observations	4,361	2,539	4,964	3,529	8,989	6,654

Note: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by primary race in parentheses. **p<0.01, *p<0.05, †p<0.10.

The rise of money in American elections is one of the most noteworthy changes to occur during this time period. The total amount of money in congressional elections increased more than 600 percent from 1980 to 2012, from \$372.5 million to \$2.6 billion (Albert 2017, 2). The cost of winning a House election more than tripled from \$500,000 in 1980 to nearly \$1.7 million in 2012 (Albert 2017, 11; CFI 2016). The demands to raise early money during the preprimary season have increased as well. Candidates need to raise far more early money today to remain viable than they did in the 1980s. As the disparity between what candidates have raised and what they will need to win increases, they may be more likely to exit the race. Experienced candidates may be especially likely to do so because they have other career options or did not anticipate the amount that would be needed either to win or to counteract spending from outside groups.

To test this possibility, I examine whether experienced candidates are more likely to drop out as the fundraising disparity to the general election winner increases. The average disparity between the receipts of non-incumbents and general election winners is \$790,000 during this period, but it increased from \$160,000 in 1980 to \$1,451,000 in 2016. Among non-incumbents in 1980, the average disparity was \$128,000 and \$191,000 for experienced on-ballot candidates and experienced dropouts, respectively. Among non-incumbents in 2016, the average disparity was \$1,392,000 and \$1,984,000 for experienced on-ballot candidates and experienced dropouts, respectively. This is a daunting amount of money to raise, even for those who are plugged into donor networks and have a proven ability to win. The same electoral and institutional variables are included in these models. I also use the total receipts raised rather than their share of district receipts to account for the overall increase in fundraising in addition to the fundraising disparity measure.⁹ The models are again restricted to primaries with no same-party incumbent in the race.

⁹ These variables are correlated at -0.23. Negative (positive) values of the disparity measure indicate that the candidate (general election winner) raised more than the general election winner (candidate).

The results are presented in Table 4. The interaction between political experience and the fundraising disparity with the general election winner is positive and significant, indicating that experienced candidates are more likely to drop out as the fundraising gap to victory widens. In fact, once the fundraising disparity is included in the models, the relationship between political experience and the decision to drop out barely reaches conventional levels of significance.

Table 4: Experienced Candidates Are More Likely to Drop Out in Expensive Elections

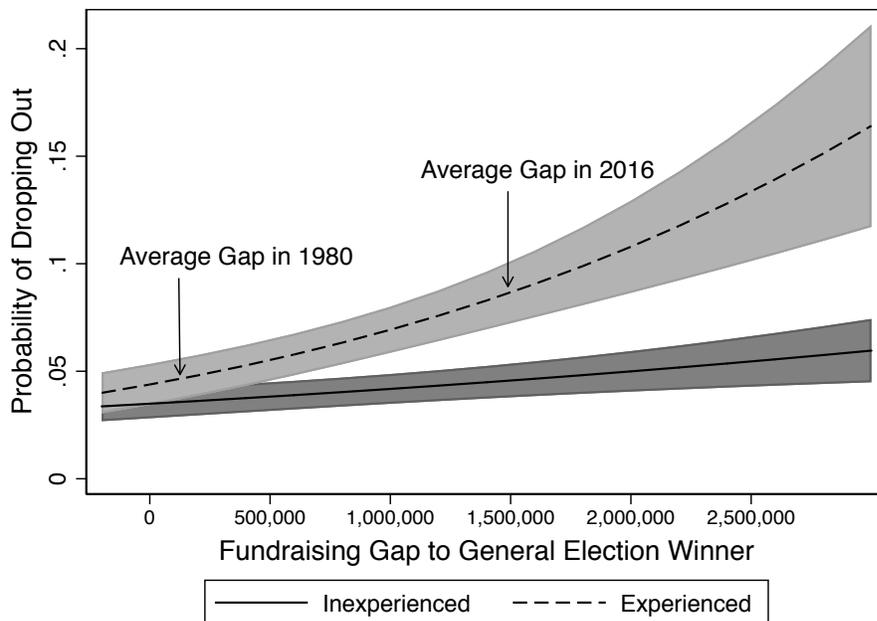
	(1) All	(2) Ideology
Previous Political Experience	0.24† (0.12)	0.06 (0.14)
Fundraising Gap to Winner	0.19** (0.05)	0.19** (0.06)
Political Experience x Fundraising Gap	0.30** (0.08)	0.28** (0.09)
Number of Primary Candidates	0.38** (0.05)	0.44** (0.06)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)
Open Seat	0.03 (0.09)	0.04 (0.11)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.65** (0.05)	0.56** (0.06)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.02** (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)
Total Receipts (\$10,000s)	-0.03** (0.00)	-0.05** (0.00)
Number of Times Run	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Female	-0.01 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.10)
Republican	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.19* (0.08)
Moderate	—	0.19* (0.05)
Constant	-5.54* (0.30)	-5.10* (0.36)
Observations	18,314	12,722

Note: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by primary race in parentheses.

**p<0.01, *p<0.05, †p<0.10.

The predicted probability of dropping out across a range of fundraising gaps is illustrated in Figure 4. A shift from the average fundraising disparity for experienced candidates in 1980 to that for experienced candidates in 2016 nearly doubles the likelihood of dropping out (from 4.7 to 8.6 percent). The cost of winning a House seat has increased enormously over time, and candidates need to raise far more money today than they did in the 1980s to be equally competitive. While the average gap between non-incumbents and general election winners was still sizeable in the 1980s, it has continued to widen in almost every election since then. Raising an additional \$1,000,000 is far more discouraging than raising an additional \$100,000. The fact that experienced candidates are more likely to bow out than inexperienced candidates as this financial disparity to victory increases also suggests that parties are limited in their ability to direct resources to candidates who are likely to be more viable.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Dropping Out Across Fundraising Gaps, for Experienced and Inexperienced Candidates



Note: Values are calculated from the model in Column 1 in Table 5.

Implications for Electoral Competition

Our final question is how these dropout decisions add up and affect the choices on the ballot and partisan victory patterns. The aim is to put these individual-level dropout decisions in a broader electoral context and consider their implications for candidate selection and political competition. Three main questions are briefly addressed here. First, how prevalent are dropouts in American elections, and how do patterns of competition differ when dropouts are included in our measures? Second and perhaps most importantly, what is the ultimate makeup of primary competitors in races where experienced candidates drop out? How often are there other experienced candidates on the ballot? Third, how might these dropout decisions matter for a political party's chance of winning the general election?

During the time period here, there are 8,424 elections at the congressional district level.¹⁰ There is a dropout in 1,221, or 14 percent, of these elections. Dropouts are more common in open seats than in districts with an incumbent (36 percent of open seats and 12 percent of districts with an incumbent had a dropout). At the primary level, there is a dropout in 1,314 of the 15,778 primary elections (8 percent), but dropouts are more common in primaries without an incumbent (21 percent).¹¹ In primaries without an incumbent, the average number of candidates increases from 2.20 to 2.36 when dropouts are included. In open seats, the average number of candidates increases from 3.75 to 4.06 and the average number of experienced candidates increases from 1.16 to 1.44 when dropouts are included. If we consider the proportion of experienced candidates to on-ballot candidates, the proportion of experienced candidates

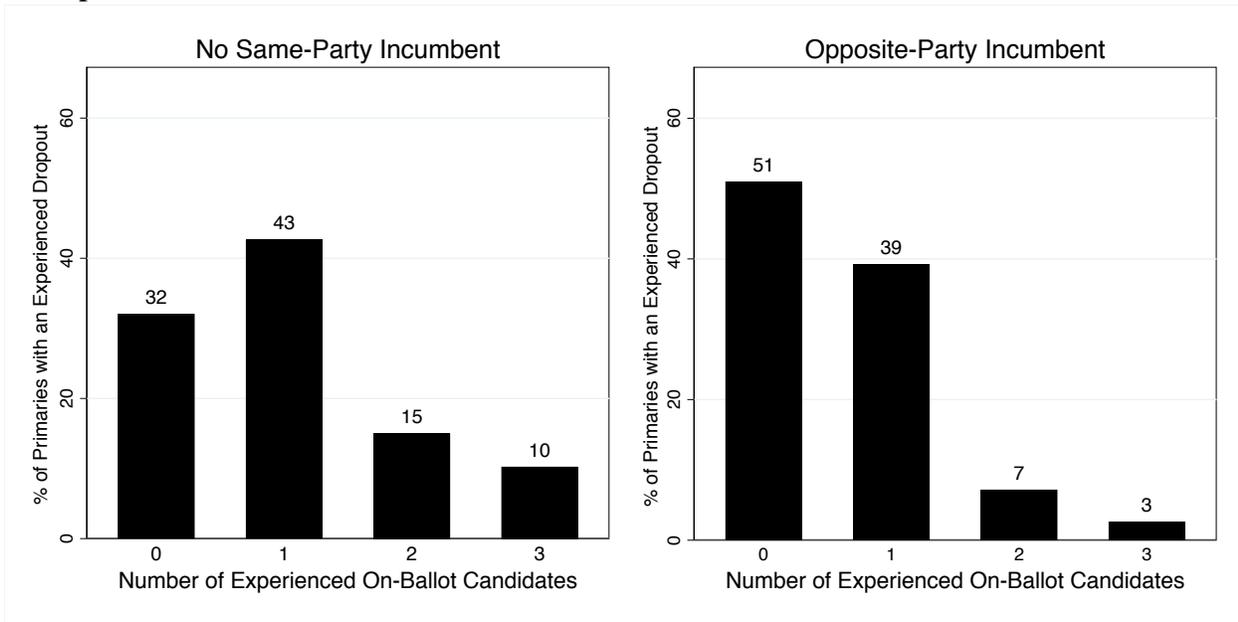
¹⁰ Of the 8,424 elections, 8,265 are regular elections and 159 are special elections.

¹¹ Of the 1,314 primaries with a dropout, 393 have an experienced dropout and 921 do not. The models above analyzed only primaries with no same-party incumbent.

increases from 0.20 to 0.24 in primaries without an incumbent and from 0.37 to 0.47 in open seats when dropouts are included in our measures.

Electoral competition thus looks better in some ways when dropouts are considered. Yet at the same time, these individuals are not available as choices to voters. We might be especially concerned about the ultimate makeup of primary competitors in races where experienced candidates dropped out. Figure 5 shows the number of experienced candidates on the ballot in primaries with at least one experienced dropout. The left panel includes races with no same-party incumbent (opposite-party incumbents and open seats), and the right panel includes races with an opposite-party incumbent (excludes open seats). In nearly one-third of primaries with an experienced dropout and no same-party incumbent, there were zero experienced candidates on the ballot. In 51 percent of primaries with an experienced dropout and an opposite-party incumbent, there were zero experienced candidates on the ballot. In terms of numbers, this amounts to 100 and 78 primary races, respectively, that had no experienced candidates on the ballot and at least one experienced dropout.

Figure 5: Number of Experienced On-Ballot Candidates in Races with an Experienced Dropout



Note: The graphs show the distribution of experienced candidates on the ballot when there is an experienced dropout. The left panel includes primaries with no same-party incumbent (opposite-party incumbents and open seats), and the right panel includes primaries with an opposite-party incumbent (excludes open seats).

In the left panel, we see that in 43 percent of races with an experienced dropout and no same-party incumbent, there is one experienced candidate in the race, which conforms to the argument that party elites recruit current and former officeholders and clear the field for this candidate (i.e., Cohen et al. 2008; Hassell 2018). However, in 57 percent of these contests, there is either no experienced candidate or more than one. The right panel shows that in races with an opposite-party incumbent and at least one experienced dropout, 39 percent of primaries have one experienced candidate on the ballot but 61 percent have zero or two or more.

It is impossible to know whether election outcomes would have been different had these individuals remained in the race, but it is worth thinking about how dropout decisions might affect a party's chance of winning the general election. The party of the experienced dropout won the general election in just 16 percent of races where there was no experienced candidate on

the ballot, but the party of the experienced on-ballot candidate won in 28 percent of races in which there was a single experienced candidate on the ballot. In open seat contests, the party of the experienced dropout won the general election in 41 percent of races where there was no experienced candidate on the ballot, but the party of the experienced on-ballot candidate won in 58 percent of races in which there was one experienced candidate on the ballot. Of course, there are other dynamics at work, but it seems as if political parties could improve their chances of winning by convincing candidates with previous political experience to remain in the race.

The dropout decisions of experienced candidates almost certainly affect the dynamics of electoral competition in a race. The steady decline in competition over the past few decades, particularly in races with incumbents, makes these individuals all the more important. The fact that experienced candidates took the initial steps of filing with the FEC and raising money is also telling, as they likely perceived some weakness in the incumbent or the other candidates in the race. Dropout decisions also have direct implications for member turnover and legislative representation, as candidates with previous political experience are much more likely to win the primary and general election and more likely to be effective legislators than those without political experience (i.e., Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Carson 2016; Porter and Treul 2018; Volden and Wiseman 2014).

Conclusion

This paper began by advocating for a broader conception of a political candidacy that extends beyond the ballot. One reason is that those who are not on the ballot may still influence patterns of electoral contestation. In addition, the characteristics of candidates matter even more for election outcomes, and systematic differences in the attributes of dropouts and on-ballot candidates have consequences for the choices available to voters and the quality of

representation. The main finding here—that experienced candidates are more likely to drop out than those without previous political experience—suggests that these choices could be better and nearly were. Moreover, the increase in the number of dropouts over time and the disparity in dropout rates between experienced and inexperienced candidates in the current era highlight the growing relevance of dropouts as a category in congressional elections. The rise of money in elections is one of the most profound electoral changes to occur over the past four decades. Candidates and officeholders frequently bemoan the amount of time they spend on fundraising, and it is no secret that raising money is perhaps the single worst part of running for office yet also among the most critical for those who want to win.

While parties certainly attempt to influence the choices on the ballot, party-centered models of the nomination process also overlook how the competing incentives of parties and candidates matter for candidate behavior (see McCarty and Schickler 2018). Party insiders can encourage some individuals to run and discourage others, but candidates are also likely to survey the field and weigh their own considerations about whether to run. The withdrawal decisions of experienced candidates, especially when no other experienced candidates are in the race, do not fit neatly with the idea that parties handpick those in their political networks to run for office. Similarly, at the race-level, party insiders are often unable to convince experienced candidates to either run for office or exit the race. In a majority of races where an experienced candidate dropped out, there are either zero experienced candidates on the ballot or two or more. It is difficult to reconcile these patterns with the argument that parties use the tools and resources at their disposal to recruit their candidate of choice and push other candidates out to clear the field.

More generally, this paper is part of a broader project about how to think about candidates and competition in elections. Given the key role of elections in representative

democracies, scholars of candidate emergence should more fully consider the question of who counts as a candidate and what counts as political competition. The findings presented here suggest that, on the one hand, competition in contemporary elections may be better than previous research suggests. We uncovered new competitors that were previously hidden from view and excluded from analyses of congressional elections, and these hidden competitors have more political experience than those who compete through Election Day. Yet at the same time, the choices on the ballot are perhaps not as good as they nearly were. We know very little about the pool of individuals who were almost, but not quite, competitors in congressional elections. The goal of this project is to learn more about these individuals and to better understand their influence on contemporary American politics.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Effect of Political Experience on Decision to Drop Out of House Race

	Full Sample	Bandwidth=0.10
State Legislative Winner	0.11** (0.03)	0.21** (0.06)
Victory Margin	0.02 (0.08)	-1.29 (1.29)
State Legislative Winner x Victory Margin	-0.06 (0.08)	0.56 (1.60)
Constant	0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Observations	1,243	182

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

**= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$.

Figure A1: Local Linear Regression Estimates for β_1 Across Bandwidths

