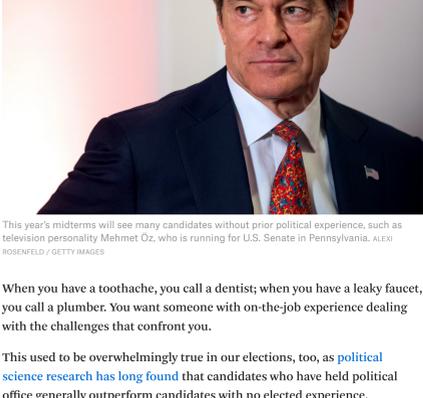


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Why More Inexperienced Candidates Are Running — And Winning

By [Geoffrey Skelley](#)
Filed under [Congress](#)



This year's midterms will see many candidates without prior political experience, such as television personality Mehmet Öz, who is running for U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania. ALEXI ROSENFIELD / GETTY IMAGES

When you have a toothache, you call a dentist; when you have a leaky faucet, you call a plumber. You want someone with on-the-job experience dealing with the challenges that confront you.

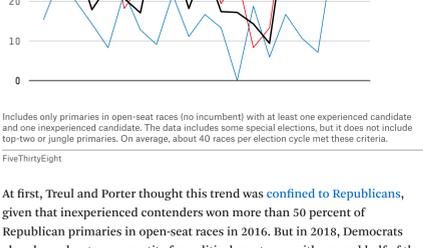
This used to be overwhelmingly true in our elections, too, as [political science research has long found](#) that candidates who have held political office generally outperform candidates with no elected experience.

But there are signs that this is now changing, with voters showing a greater willingness to back amateur candidates. This includes, of course, now-former President Donald Trump — the ultimate example — but it also applies to, say, plenty of U.S. House members. It's not a one-party trend, either, as both Republicans and Democrats increasingly support inexperienced aspirants. And it's likely that more amateurs could be headed to Capitol Hill after the 2022 midterm elections — potentially lesser-known House candidates, like AirBnB executive Andrew Kalloch running as a Democrat in Oregon, or higher-profile U.S. Senate contenders, like television personality and physician Mehmet Öz running as a Republican in Pennsylvania.

The phenomenon of more inexperienced candidates running for office is something political scientists [Sarah Treul](#) and [Rachel Porter](#) of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have worked to document.¹ Focusing on primaries for House seats where no incumbent ran from 1980 to 2020,² Treul and Porter [found a substantial uptick](#) in the number of inexperienced candidates beating out experienced candidates, especially in the past three election cycles, as the chart below shows. And while some of these inexperienced candidates have (nonelected) backgrounds in politics or government, most don't.

In both parties, inexperienced candidates are winning

Share of open-seat House primaries won by candidates with no elected experience, by party and overall, 1980-2020



Includes only primaries in open-seat races (no incumbent) with at least one experienced candidate and one inexperienced candidate. The data includes some special elections, but it does not include two- or jungle primaries. On average, about 40 races per election cycle met these criteria.

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At first, Treul and Porter thought this trend was [confined to Republicans](#), given that inexperienced contenders won more than 50 percent of Republican primaries in open-seat races in 2016. But in 2018, Democrats also showed a strong appetite for political amateurs, with around half of the party's primary winners in open seats having never held office before. This trend continued for both parties in 2020, too.

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"We started to see these patterns in the more recent congressional elections where the candidates without prior experience were performing better," said Treul. "And we started to think that these old theories the [political science] discipline had might not be holding up anymore." Rather, changes driven by campaign fundraising, voter attitudes, political rhetoric and weak political parties seem to have diminished the advantages that experienced candidates have long had, such as campaign expertise, high local name recognition and already-established donor networks.

For starters, inexperienced contenders just don't face the same barriers they once did in attracting financial support from interest groups and donors. Traditionally, it's been a challenge for newcomers to attract donations from [political action committees](#), which are often key to congressional candidates raising enough money [to win their elections](#). But Treul and Porter found that ideological PACs — typically interest groups focused on a narrow range of issues or just one — have given more to inexperienced candidates in recent years.

Moreover, Porter [found in her research](#) with co-author [Tyler Steelman](#) (also of UNC-Chapel Hill) that the more money an inexperienced candidate raises from outside their district early in their campaign, the more campaign cash they tend to raise overall. They're also more likely to win their primary. In the social media age, it's just become much easier for candidates with no elected experience to connect with a [broad group of small donors](#) who are receptive to their candidacies. In fact, as I wrote last year, an amateur candidate [can raise millions](#) with the right viral video, even in hopeless contests.

Porter told me that the [amount of money spent in politics](#) following the Supreme Court's [2010 decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission](#) is likely working in concert with the increased interconnectedness brought about by the internet to collectively boost amateur candidates' profiles. "We don't think it's a coincidence that all of this kind of came to a head at the same time," said Porter.

Beyond money, though, voters are also [increasingly disillusioned](#) with our institutions, [especially Congress](#), and are also attracted to anti-establishment rhetoric. As a result, they may assign less value to a candidate's previous elected experience and may be more receptive to outsider candidates with messages promising to shake things up. It's this combination of inexperience and anti-establishment rhetoric that makes these candidates especially attractive to voters, too, according to Treul, as outsiders sound more credible making those appeals. In fact, her research with co-author [Eric Hansen](#) of Loyola University Chicago [has found](#) that voters have more positive reactions to a candidate when the candidate uses anti-establishment messages compared with establishment-sounding rhetoric, and that respondents may somewhat prefer an amateur candidate over an experienced one.



The increased success of inexperienced candidates may also speak to the [weakness of our political parties](#), which serve less of a gatekeeping role than they once did. This is partly down to the [growing influence](#) interest groups have in grooming and supporting candidates. "Where the party puts its money and where these organizations put their money isn't always the same," said Porter. "These organizations say, 'We don't necessarily need to go with the party candidate. We can pick this other person.'" Often, though, this person isn't the party's preferred candidate.

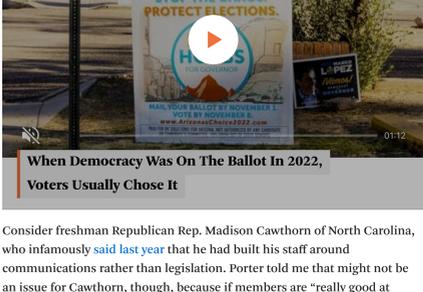
Perhaps surprisingly, though, the uptick in inexperienced candidates running and winning nominations hasn't meaningfully hurt a party's chances of winning House seats. That's in part because primaries are often the main decision point in determining a district's next representative, given there are so [few competitive House districts](#). But Treul and Porter also found that inexperienced candidates just don't perform any worse than experienced ones in general elections where there is not an incumbent. And that may be in large part a side effect of [polarization and negative partisanship](#) — that is, the reality that most voters are going to support their party's nominee, no matter what.

Treul and Porter plan to do more research on how their findings may apply to the Senate, but there's little reason to think that the same forces aren't at work there, too. After all, out of nine Senate contests in 2020 where a newcomer won, five were won by candidates with no electoral experience. In fact, because Senate candidates run statewide campaigns, an amateur candidate who already has a fair bit of notoriety — like, say, Öz in Pennsylvania — might have an even easier time getting elected than an amateur in a House race. "This is where you see bigger names. It's easier to get media coverage. It's easier to get attention," said Treul. She also noted that because a Senate seat carries more legislative value than a House seat, outside groups may even spend more on behalf of candidates they like.

There are some upsides, though, to more inexperienced candidates winning their elections. Namely, they may lead to more diversity within Congress, with more women and people of color [holding office](#), as [they historically](#) have had [more difficulty](#) breaking into the elected offices that have traditionally served as stepping stones to Congress. Porter pointed to the 2018 cycle, where she told me a majority of nonincumbent women who won House races didn't have a history of holding political office. "The alternative pathways to getting into Congress mean that we're getting greater representation," she said.

But there are some downsides. Namely, there is simply less governing experience in Congress now. Treul and Porter found that between 40 and 52 percent of the freshmen House members in the three most recent congresses had no previous experience as an elected official, compared with an average of about 30 percent per class between 1991 and 2015. If new members keep being this inexperienced, it could have a detrimental impact on Congress's efficacy — research suggests that prior elected experience [can make a member of Congress a more effective legislator](#). But perhaps even more troubling than the decline in experience is that some of the newly elected members don't appear to be interested in learning to govern. Their voters may not care that much, either.

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Consider freshman Republican Rep. Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina, who infamously [said last year](#) that he had built his staff around communications rather than legislation. Porter told me that might not be an issue for Cawthorn, though, because if members are "really good at seeming like they're good at their job, no one's going to be angry." Similarly, Treul mentioned GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and how it might not matter to her constituents that she's been [kicked off of committees](#), as they may have voted for her for other reasons than her ability to govern. "What we're all valuing our members of Congress for has completely changed," said Treul. "I think that's pretty fascinating and pretty damning for the institution as a whole."

On the one hand, inexperienced candidates aren't necessarily a bad thing for Congress, especially if it increases representation, but if many successful political amateurs are uninterested in governing, Treul and Porter fear Congress will become even more dysfunctional. Treul thinks that might be where things are headed, too. "I think we're still at the tip of the iceberg," she told me. "I see a world continuing to look more and more like the elections of the last few years, where inexperienced candidates just become the norm and that's who we're sending to office."

Geoffrey Skelley is a senior elections analyst at FiveThirtyEight. | [✉](#) | [@geoffreyss](#)

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