Amateurs: A (Mostly) Stable, Undesired, but Benign Presence in American Politics[*]

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Abstract

As American politics grows more dysfunctional – polarized, antagonistic, and unproductive – some have laid the blame on politicians without previous elected experience and those voters who support them. Such blame casts "amateurs" as extremists without governing skills or respect for democratic institutions. In this paper, I critically evaluate the apparent threat posed by amateurs to U.S. democratic functioning. Contrary to popular expectations, I show amateurs are no more deleterious to government than their experienced counterparts. Amateurs are (1) no more prevalent in government now than in the past across most offices (2) indistinguishable from experienced officials in background, ideology, and lawmaking behaviors, and (3) generally undesired by voters. I provide evidence using the most comprehensive set of candidate characteristics to date (N = 188,925), a survey experiment (N = 2,403), and a regression discontinuity design. The results suggest that, to the extent amateurism is a problem for democracy, it is one downstream of polarization. They also suggest a need to re-evaluate the connection between prior elected experience and candidate quality.

Introduction

Contemporary U.S. politics are marked by a ubiquitous sense of dysfunction. An increasingly polarized Congress (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015; Thomsen 2014) has passed record low quantities of legislation (Warburton 2024), with a rising tide of ideologically extreme candidates running for office (Hall 2019). Politicians engage in nasty, divisive discourse (Frimer et al. 2023; Jacob et al. 2024; Zeitzoff 2023), which appears tolerated by an electorate with little trust in government (Pew Research Center 2024) and significant disdain for opposing partisans (Iyengar et al. 2012).

Some blame growing dysfunction on the inexperience of newly elected officials and the voters who tolerate them (La Raja and Rauch 2020). Recent research suggests a rise in "amateur" politicians (those without prior elected experience) winning office in Congress (Porter and Treul 2024), buoyed perhaps by donor willingness to financially support amateur candidacies (Porter and Steelman 2023) and voter demand for political "outsiders" (Hansen and Treul 2021). More generally, the electoral benefits of candidate quality appear to have withered substantially since the 1950s (Algara and Bae 2024; DeLuca 2023a). If inexperienced politicians lack the requisite skills (Volden and Wiseman 2014) or respect for institutional norms (Pfiffner 2021), there are concerns over further erosion of democratic functioning as their prevalence grows (Azari 2017).

Is U.S. democracy threatened by amateur politicians? In this paper, I evaluate the prevalence, qualifications, and demand for amateurs, and determine their contribution to U.S. political dysfunction. Using the most comprehensive set of candidate profiles to date (N = 188,925), I show amateur politicians pose no more threat to democratic functioning than their experienced colleagues. Their presence is historically normal and generally stable across most levels of government, and they are ideologically, occupationally, and rhetorically similar to experienced candidates. Additionally, using both a survey experiment (N = 2,403) and a regression discontinuity design, I show voters still have a strong preference for experience, albeit one mediated by preferences for partisan and policy congruence. To the extent

amateurs are a problem for U.S. democratic functioning, they are one, like many maladies of U.S. politics, far downstream of political polarization.

Overall, these results challenge dire prognoses of rising amateurism in U.S. politics. Like many phenomena in American politics, partisanship and polarization are focal points of voters' evaluations of candidates. The recent prevalence of inexperience in American government is only novel at the highest levels, and only briefly; politicians have a long history of "learning on the job" across the country's many elected positions. In polarized times, however, voters are forced to make difficult decisions under constrained sets of choices. While voters would prefer more experienced candidates, they strongly prefer alignment on party and policy, reaffirming the centrality of partisanship in contemporary U.S. politics. Additionally, these result challenges our understanding of elected experience being a clear signal of quality (Krasno and Green 1988); amateurs possess similar non-elected political backgrounds and behave similarly in office to experienced officials. It is perhaps necessary, then, to re-evaluate the measurement of candidate quality with alternative characteristics (DeLuca 2023b).

Elected Experience and Candidate Quality

Research on candidate success has generally highlighted the importance of candidate experience and qualification; features of a candidate's background making them particularly suited for elected office. Occupational background, for example, may offer voters simple heuristics for determining qualification for office (Adams et al. 2021; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; McDermott 2005). Particular backgrounds in environments relevant to the functions of elected office, such as experience in teaching when running for school board, are also shown to boost candidate performance (Atkeson and Hamel 2020).

Prior elected experience in particular imbues candidates with the direct benefits of staffing resources, funding networks, and name recognition (Bonica 2017; Cox and Katz 1996; Squire and Wright 1990). These benefits serve to reduce voter uncertainty over their preference

alignment with candidates; incumbents can focus a campaign around their standing with the district (Druckman et al. 2020). Indirectly, elected experience also acts as a signal of *quality* to voters; having won an election before and being familiar with the functioning of government, the candidate is perhaps more likely to deliver payoffs to voters (Fowler 2018). Those who act in a way that undermines this presumption of quality are likely to quickly find themselves out of office (Mondak 1995).

Direct measurement of these perceptions and preferences for experience and qualification, however, yields ambiguous results, leaving open the possibility that demand for inexperience has risen in parallel with the prevalence of amateurs (Porter and Treul 2024). Experimental research using conjoint designs has shown respondents broadly prefer candidates with higher educational attainment (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2023) and from certain political and occupational backgrounds (Kirkland and Coppock 2018). Such designs, however, have difficulty disentangling *prescribed* qualification from *perceived* qualification; the attribute itself is the measure of quality, but the degree to which perceived quality impacts choice is unclear.

Other research indicates rising demand for candidates from non-political backgrounds or who espouse anti-establishment rhetoric (Uscinski et al. 2021). In a factorial design, Hansen and Treul (2021) find evidence of a weak preference for inexperienced over experienced candidates, especially among those using anti-establishment rhetoric. The extent to which this apparent preference for inexperience is out of genuine *desire* for less experience or frustration with those who are experienced, however, is unclear, and the evidence itself is "inconsistent" (self-described by the authors).

Weak Preference for Experience

While the *direction* of preferences over experience are perhaps ambiguous, so too are the *relative strength* of such preferences. Prior research indicates few preferences are as strong as those held over party, ideology, and policy (Campbell et al. 1960; Downs 1957), suggesting

preferences for experience are dominated by partisan considerations when the two are in conflict. Uncontroversially, voters prefer candidates with whom they agree on policy issues and who will act to advance such policy positions while in government. While possible that partisanship exercises an independent effect as a social identity consideration (Dias and Lelkes 2022; Iyengar et al. 2012), such an effect on preference is difficult to disentangle from partisanship as a heuristic for policy positions (Mummolo et al. 2021; Orr et al. 2023). So strong is this preference for policy alignment that apparent preferences for features of candidate identity more plausibly independent of ideology (e.g. gender, race) are used as signals of policy stances, particularly in low-information elections (Crowder-Meyer et al. 2020). Preferences over policy alignment operate both prospectively and retrospectively; voters punish ideologically extreme candidates in general elections (Hall 2015) and frequently remove misaligned representatives from office (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Jacobson 2015).

While the degree to which the mass public has polarized is subject to continued debate (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina et al. 2008; Lelkes 2016), it is almost certainly the case that parties in government have come to represent policy positions that are both more internally cohesive and relatively extreme (Hetherington 2001; Theriault 2008). Party labels carry significant policy information across both levels of government (Hopkins 2018) and different geographies (Hopkins et al. 2022). To the extent, then, that the partisans in the mass public have sorted on ideological lines (Levendusky 2009), partisan and policy signals from candidates efficiently convey alignment on a large number of positions. From a principle-agent perspective, insofar as contemporary policy debates are contested over a single dimension, voters selecting ideologically misaligned representatives a more likely to endure steeper utility costs relative to the selection of aligned but perhaps less experienced candidates.

Relatedly, in instances where partisan information is a noisier indicator of preference alignment, such as in local politics, where issue positions are less sorted along partisan lines (Jensen et al. 2021), the weight placed on divergence for any given issue may decrease.

Institutional variables may also affect the weight placed on preference alignment. Executive positions where power is centralized, for example, or legislative chambers with heavy partisan skews, might engender greater weight on policy disagreement insofar as the government has greater leeway to implement their policy agenda.

Furthermore, experience itself may be a noisy signal of qualification. Some research indicates prior elected experience is associated with desirable traits (Druckman et al. 2020), but the uniqueness of these traits to elected officials is not obvious. For example, lawyers may have traits particularly suitable for elected office (Miller 1995), although the electoral success of lawyers may be more attributable to their fundraising advantage than to their infectious personalities (Bonica 2020). Indeed, amateur candidates are increasingly successful fundraisers (Porter and Steelman 2023) and "celebrity" candidates are able to successfully compete with established candidates on name recognition (Knecht and Rosentrater 2021). While voters may have a genuine preference for quality, experience may not be a sufficiently strong signal to affect voting behavior.

The existing literature, then, does not conclusively support an expectation of greater amateur prevalence, that amateurs are unambiguously lower quality than experienced candidates, or that voters have lowered their standards for qualification. A diagnosis of amateurs as a problem for American democracy therefore requires a comprehensive evaluation of their prevalence, characteristics, and demand.

Is Inexperience More Common?

Before diagnosing the potential threat amateurs pose to democratic functioning, it is important to understand their general prevalence in U.S. politics beyond any single institution. If voters increasingly prefer (in)experience, or larger institutional forces are benefiting or harming candidates with or without prior experience, we would expect the change in amateur success to be reflected uniformly across offices. To that end, I compare elections across

national, state, and local jurisdictions by documenting the change in proportion of office-holders with prior elected experience (either as an incumbent for their current office or in another position).

To do so, I compile a dataset of elections across all levels of government between 1980 and 2024. I merge and update existing data on Congressional (Algara and Bae 2024; Porter and Treul 2024), state legislative (Klarner 2018), and local elections (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2023) with original data on statewide contests. Because elected experience beyond incumbency is only available for Congressional and gubernatorial contests, I estimate a lower bound for the proportion of experienced officeholders in state legislative and local elections. I do so by subsetting to state-years with common support between the two sets of data, searching *within* state/local data for incumbency or previously held office, then searching *across* state/local data using probabilistic record linkage, exact matching by state and fuzzy string matching by first and last name (Imai 2024).[1] The resulting dataset represents the most comprehensive analysis of previous experience of election winners to date, with a total of 188,925 distinct elections.

Figure 1 shows the overall share of experienced elected officials is high and mostly stable (shown by the solid line). In federal and state offices, the share of experienced officials is consistently at least 75%, and often around 50% in local offices. For many of these offices, however, incumbency is the main avenue through which elected experience is gained; few candidates move between offices. While research suggests the "incumbency advantage" has seemingly declined across many offices (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002; Carson and Jacobson 2023), it appears buoyed by a lack of competitive elections (DeLuca 2023a). Experience, then, is still the norm across all of American contests.

The trend of rising inexperience documented by Porter and Treul (2024), however, is among newly elected officials. The share of experienced, newly elected officials is shown by

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[1]One consequence of this bounding exercise is that years toward the beginning of the local elections dataset (early 1990s) have perhaps artificially lower levels of experience due to data missingness in prior elections.
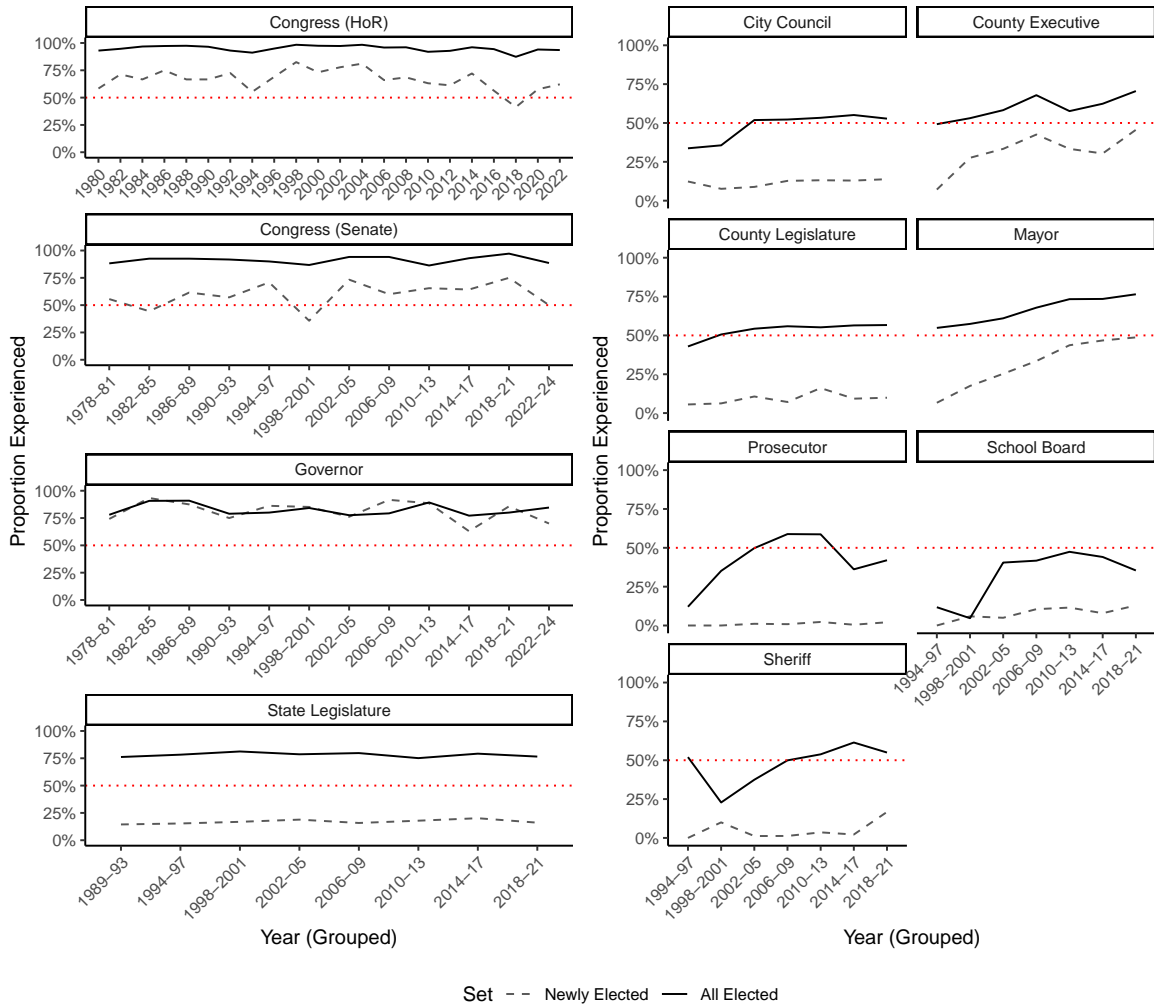
Figure 1: The share of experienced officeholders is stable across all offices. Solid lines show share of all officeholders with elected experience, dashed lines show share of newly elected officeholders. Lower bound estimated for state legislative and local elections. Where elections occur asynchronously within consolidated office type, years are grouped into 4-year intervals.

the dashed line. With their data (1980-2020), there is a clear period of declining experience between 2014 and 2018 (albeit ending with a small increase between 2018 and 2020), decreasing from roughly 75% to 50%. Updating the trend through 2022, however, indicates a rebound in the share of experienced politicians to levels seen in 2012, suggesting the elections of 2016 and 2018 may have been aberrations or products of short-term forces of the Trump presidency.

Across other offices, the share of experienced, newly elected officials is similarly stable.

There are certainly periods of decline (for example, in the Senate between 1994 and 2001), but never does it amount to a long-term trend. It is possible the share of experienced newcomers may continue to decline in the Senate and constitute a trend, but it is worth noting the the decline in experience in the Senate (2021-2024) occurs asynchronously with the decline in the House (2014-2018), suggesting minimal, if any, cross-office demand for inexperience. Indeed, in some local offices (mayoral and county executive), the share of experienced newcomers is *rising* in the long-term.

To the extent amateurs represent a threat to American democratic functioning, then, it is not due to increasing prevalence across offices. Amateurs are a clear minority within every office and for every incoming cohort of lawmakers. It is possible, however, that amateurs command an out-sized share of influence in politics despite their small numbers. While traditional party structures, especially in Congress, reward senior members with more influence with leadership roles on more powerful committees, there are recent examples of amateurs gaining influence by operating outside the bounds of the committee system.[2] A diagnosis of the amateur "threat" requires an evaluation of who amateurs are, what they believe, and what they do once elected. I turn to such an analysis in the next section.

Are Amateurs Unique?

The literature suggests previous electoral experience primarily benefits candidates directly; experienced candidates have proven fundraiser networks, access to franking privileges, and name recognition among constituents. If amateurs threaten American democracy, it is because they lack the *indirect* benefit of quality; experience is a genuine indicator of political ability. In this section, I critically evaluate the relationship between prior elected experience and quality. I consider four ways in which differences in elected experience may obfuscate other similarities between candidates: experience outside of elected office, ideology, legislative

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[2]For example, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's proposal of the "Green New Deal" commanded significant policy attention, perhaps out-sized given its chance of legislative success.

effectiveness, and rhetorical behavior. Across all such features, I find minimal differences between amateurs and non-amateurs, reinforcing the conclusion that amateurs do not uniquely threaten American politics.

Non-Elected Experience

Elected experience is only one of many forms of political experience. As the experimental results show, respondents perceive lawyers and small business owners to be of similar levels of qualification for office as previous officeholders. Elected experience may signal a particular *form* of quality as it relates to the ability of a candidate to successfully win an election, but winning office is but one of many demands of a politician's job. Diagnosing the broader emergence of "amateurism" in U.S. politics, then, requires consideration of alternative forms of political experience which may substitute for elected experience in the eyes of voters.

One of the most accessible avenues to political experience is public sector employment. While there are several thousand elected positions, there are over 20 million public sector jobs. Most of these jobs involve delivering government services to constituents, but many interface directly with political decision-making, with additional opportunities for volunteering in civic organizations and working with local party chapters. Every elected official is supported by staff with knowledge of the political process and the demands of the job. How common, then, is political experience, defined beyond elected experience, among elected officials?

I collect over 5 decades worth of data on political experience in the Minnesota State Legislature. Focusing on a single case allows for significantly more granular detail in the backgrounds of legislators, and Minnesota in particular offers a case where partisan legislative control has been meaningfully contested for several decades and data on personal backgrounds are readily available. Additionally, state legislatures in particular offer a case where experienced candidates are likely to be exceptional, as the modal newly elected legislator has no previous elected experience. If there is a meaningful gap between experienced

and inexperienced candidates, it is most likely to be found here.

I collect data for 5,170 legislator-sessions from 1971-2024, including prior election history, experience across different levels of government (Federal, State, County, and Municipal), and experience across different governmental divisions (Executive, Legislative, Criminal Justice, and Education). Such political experience spans a large variety of positions. For example, some members held prior appointments to the Minnesota Public Service Commission, as legislative staff members for previous state legislators, on school board district planning committees, or on water district river management organizations.

I present the results in Figure 2. In the upper left panel, I plot the share of state legislators with prior elected experience, for both newly elected and all elected legislators, showing a generally stable pattern of inexperience among newly elected legislators.

In the bottom left panel, I plot the proportion of legislators with any political experience (elected or otherwise) outside of their current role of state legislator. Here, the "experience" of newly elected legislators doubles; while the proportion of newly elected members reaches a high of of over 25% in 2007, that high is over 50% when considering all forms of experience. This trend extends similarly even to true "amateurs:" generally more than 25% of those without elected experience have some other form of elected experience. The right panels also indicate this experience is coming from fairly common areas for all elected, newly elected, and amateur politicians; in no particular division or level of government are non-amateur politicians overwhelmingly outnumbering amateurs. In this way, inexperienced candidates appear much more similar to experienced candidates than we may otherwise assume.

The gap in experience between all elected and amateur legislators widened between 2000 and 2020, but has closed in the past two election cycles. The right panels indicate this gap has primarily emerged from a rise in legislative experience (outside roles of state legislators) among all legislators and a decrease in experience in state government amongst newly elected and amateur candidates; experienced candidates are much more likely to have obtained experience from roles in the legislature or state government. While this experience gap may

Figure 2: Political experience, elected and non-elected, of state legislative seat holders in Minnesota, 1971-2024. Upper left panel shows proportion of office holders with prior elected experience, overall and among newly-elected members. Lower left shows proportion with any prior political experience (outside of their current appointment to the legislature), overall, amongly newly-elected members, and among newly-elected members without elected experience (amateurs). Similar quantities estimated by experience type in the right panel.

be attenuated by unobserved patterns not considered in this analysis (e.g. potentially higher proportions of private practice lawyers being elected), the overall pattern of results primarily suggests that newly elected officials have more political experience than has otherwise been documented, but also that the career pipeline to political positions may be shifting away from more classical forms of experience.

Ideology

One caricature of amateurs is that they are ideologically extreme. Both Congresswomen Cori Bush and Marjorie Taylor Greene (amateurs when elected), for example, are perceived to be at the far left and right flanks of their parties. If growing extremity in the chamber is to blame for gridlock and partisan animosity, amateurs may therefore represent the vanguard of such dysfunction. However, it appears also likely that polarization has increased independently of the rise of amateurs. Previous research indicates polarization in Congress, for example, has increased steadily since the 1970s, while amateur prevalence was only markedly higher between 2016 and 2018. Elected officials are likely more extreme than previously, but amateurs may be no more extreme than their experienced counterparts.

To determine whether amateurs are more extreme than experienced elected officials, I collect a comprehensive set of measures on ideology across a variety of offices. In offices where roll-call-based measures of ideology are available (Congress and state legislatures), I use the standard measures of the field: DW-NOMINATE and NP-Scores from Lewis et al. (2024) and Shor and McCarty (2011), respectively. In all cases, I use campaign finance-based scores from (Bonica 2023).[3]

There are no consistent differences between amateurs and experienced politicians in their ideology. The results, presented in Figure 3, show the coefficient of each ideology measure regressed on a binary indicator of amateur status for each elected official, with two-way fixed effects for year and jurisdiction. While Democratic amateurs appear more liberal than their experienced colleagues in state legislatures, city councils, and county legislatures, this is only true when using campaign financed-based measures of ideology, which have low intra-party correlations with roll-call behavior (Hill and Huber 2017; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017).[4] When using roll-call measures of ideology, there is no difference between amateurs

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[3]For local offices, I use the contributor CF-score included by de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023), as recipient-based scores are often unavailable offices with little fundraising activity. Because Senate data are collected at the contest-level and not candidate-level, ideology data are not available for this analysis.

[4]For state legislative elections, I also analyze DWDIME (in Appendix S2.3), a campaign-finance based measure of ideology that predicts roll-call measures (Bonica 2018), meant to ameliorate issues with low
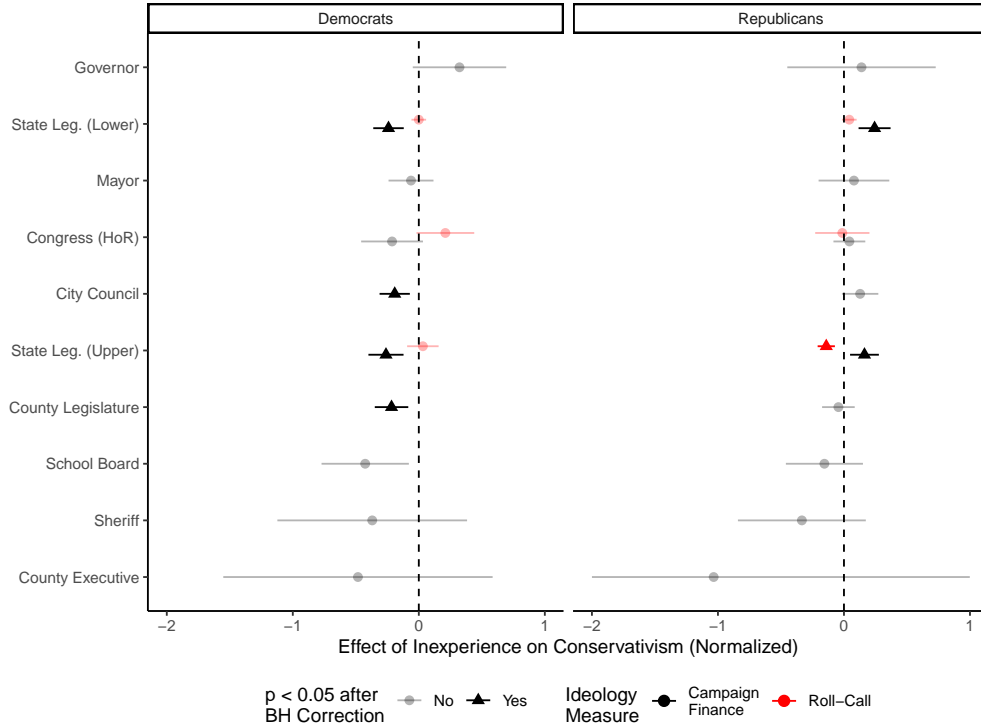
Figure 3: Inexperience does not consistently increase ideological extremity. Models fit using binary operationalization of experience and normalized measures of ideology. Data include only newly elected officials. Two-way fixed effects included for election year and jurisdiction. Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple hypothesis testing applied. 95% confidence intervals.

and experienced candidates. Similarly, Republican amateurs only appear more conservative in state legislatures, but again only using campaign-finance scores. The result changes sign completely for upper chambers of state legislatures when using roll-call measures; amateurs appear more moderate than experienced representatives. Even taking all campaign finance measures at face value, the substantive effect is small: at maximum, one quarter of a standard deviation in ideology scores.

Given the recent success of amateurs appears related to an expansion of funding opportunities for candidates without elected experience (Porter and Steelman 2023), it is not surprising that the evidence for differences in amateur and experienced ideology is limited

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intra-party correlations between campaign finance scores and roll-call scores. Due to the limited availability of such scores, however, the estimates are highly uncertain, and in no instance do they give statistically significant results.

to measures incorporating donor behavior. When it comes to actual behavior in legislative chambers, however, amateurs appear ideologically equivalent to experienced candidates. While polarization has increased in government over the last several decades, it is because of uniform shifts in both amateur and experienced candidates, not amateurs alone.

Legislative Effectiveness

While the many of the preceding analyses focus on evaluations of candidates during campaigns, a lingering questions remains on how inexperienced politicians behave *once in office*. A large literature connects candidate qualification with electoral success, but we know little about differences between experienced and inexperienced candidates once they have won office.

The obvious representational concern of electing political amateurs is that, by virtue of having no experience in elected office, they may struggle to govern effectively in a complex institutional environment without knowledge of rules, procedure, our resources (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Indeed, having experienced staff appears related to effectiveness (Ommundsen 2023), which amateurs may or may not be positioned to hire. To the extent political experience is transferable between institutions, greater seniority is strongly associated with effectiveness as a legislator (Miquel and Snyder 2006).

Alternatively, the qualities associated with previous electoral experience may not be easily transferable between offices. Hirano and Snyder (2014) show job-specific human capital (e.g. the relevance of prior experience) strongly conditions candidate success. As previously discussed, such job-specific human capital may be attained through non-electoral means. Furthermore, adapting to a new institutional environment may be equally taxing for both experienced and inexperienced incoming members, who may "learn on the job" at equal rates (Miquel and Snyder 2006). Lastly, the very fact that the amateur candidates won *despite* their inexperience, which is a net negative in the eyes of voters, may be a stronger indicator of quality. Anzia and Berry (2011), for example, find congresswomen deliver more

federal spending to their districts than congressmen, likely because women must overcome sex discrimination and higher barriers to candidate entry than men and are therefore likely to be exceptional performers.

For this analysis, I focus on legislative effectiveness, which is generally described as "the proven ability to advance a member's agenda items through the legislative process and into law" (Volden and Wiseman 2014, p.18). This conception gives greater weight to substantive policy items advanced into later stages of lawmaking. Classical scores of legislative effectiveness are calculated by Volden and Wiseman (2014) for Members of Congress and by Bucchianeri et al. (2024) for state legislatures. Alternatively, legislative effectiveness can be conceived of as advancing "notable" legislation; that is, legislation related to salient and important problems of a given period. Such scores are given by Chiou and Goplerud (2024).

Table 1: Prior Experience and Legislative Effectiveness

Dependent Variable:	Effectiveness (Percent Rank)		
Office:	House of Representatives		State Leg.
Measure:	Volden and Wiseman	Chiou and Goplerud	Bucchianeri et al.
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)
Variables			
Prior Experience	-0.0131	-0.0030	-0.0551***
	(0.0098)	(0.0112)	(0.0093)
Fixed-effects			
Election Year Cohort	Yes	Yes	Yes
Seniority	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics			
Observations	6,354	4,074	11,207
Election Years	1981-2021	1981-2009	1990-2016
R^2	0.04701	0.08525	0.01140
Within R^2	0.00043	2.31×10^{-5}	0.00151

Clustered (Election Year Cohort) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

I merge each set of data with the related legislator-level data on previous experience, and calculate the legislator-session percent rank of effectiveness for cross-year comparability. I

control for cohort effects by including a fixed effect for election year, and similarly control for differences in seniority with a fixed effect for years of seniority.

The results, shown in Table 1, indicate no significant relationship between prior elected experience and legislative effectiveness, particularly in Congress. In fact, there appears to be a significant *negative*, albeit small, relationship in state legislatures; experienced legislators rank 5 percentage points lower in rank-order effectiveness than inexperienced legislators. These results suggest the legislative burdens experienced by amateur politicians are either not so burdensome or are matched (and possible outweighed) by the positive factors buoying amateur abilities.

Importantly, this is not to say experienced and inexperienced politicians advance "good" legislation at equal rates. Such a designation would likely be highly subjective and difficult to measure, but is perhaps an avenue for future research.

Because the share of amateurs varies between election years, I also consider whether certain cohorts of amateur legislators are particularly (in)effective. For example, a high proportion of amateurs may suggest greater demand-side forces for inexperience, "lowering the bar" for qualification. I therefore subset the data to election cohorts above the median level of amateur success and above the 75th percentile. The results (presented in full in Appendix S2.4) are indistinguishable from those presented above; amateurs are no less effective (and sometimes more effective) than politicians with prior elected experience.

Rhetorical Behavior

The job of an elected officials goes beyond governing; politicians are public figures who engage in the controversies of the day. In their capacity as public figures, amateur politicians may give less deference to institutional norms and standards for behavior because of their unfamiliarity with the setting. The election of Donald Trump, himself a political outsider, underscores how many features of government were traditions and norms rather than written rules (Pfiffner 2021). Trump's election seemingly spurred greater willingness to engage

in indecorous and even hateful rhetoric (Crandall et al. 2018; Newman et al. 2021), a feature perhaps shared by amateur politicians not acculturated to expectations of government behavior.

How politicians engage with topics and which topics they engage with affect citizen engagement with politics (Grimmer 2013) and broadly impact the quality of deliberative democratic representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008). If amateurs engage in political discourse distinctively, it may strongly impact downstream democratic functioning. Reinforcing group identities, for example, exacerbates affective polarization (Bäck et al. 2023), and toxicity online may beget additional toxicity with network-connectivity effects (Kiddle et al. 2024; Obadimu et al. 2021).

I utilize data on all public statements made by Members of the House Representatives from 2023-2024 (n = 1,043,195), collected by Westwood and Lelkes (2023). For each statement, the authors use a large language model to classify the speech into varying, non-exclusive categories. For this brief analysis, I focus on three: attacks, appeals to bipartisanship, and policy discussion. If amateurs lack the expertise to engage in policy discussions or engage in more toxic rhetorical behavior, such differences are likely to emerge from these classifications. I merge this statement-level data with all freshmen representatives from the 118th Congress, who began their terms in January 2023. I then compute the average monthly share of statements belonging to each category.

Results are shown in Figure 4. Across all categories, there are no meaningfully large differences in speech patterns over the last two years between freshmen with and without prior elected experience. A close examination of the scales of the y-axes reveals an inordinate amount of attention is given to policy discussion; roughly half of all public statements are related to public policy. Comparatively little attention is given to appeals to bipartisanship (roughly 5%) and even less is given to political attacks (less than 2%). Further splitting attacks into policy or personal attacks again reveals no difference between experienced and
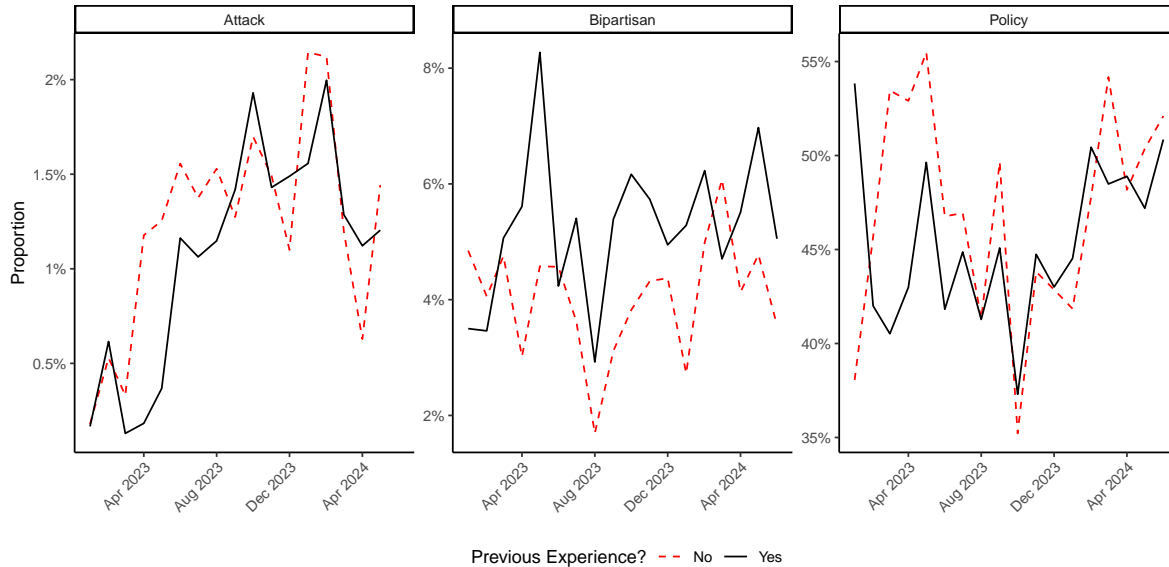
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Figure 4: Amateur and non-amateur Members of Congress speak about similar topics. Classified rhetoric of freshmen members of the 118 Congress by prior elected experience, 2023-2024. The y-axis indicates the proportion of rhetoric devoted to attacks (either personal or policy), appeals to bipartisanship, and policy discussion at monthly intervals.

inexperienced freshmen.[5]

These results again suggest amateurs are not so different from politicians with prior elected experience. To the extent we are concerned about political discourse become nastier, blame is shared equally among amateur and non-amateur politicians. Fortunately, however, it appears a majority of politicians still focus most of their public attention toward policy discussion, matching the strong preferences of voters.

Do Voters Care About Experience?

The preceding sections suggest amateurs are rather unremarkable; they are no more prevalent now than previously, and have similar backgrounds, attitudes, and behaviors. Given these similarities are not obvious, however, we may be concerned that voters *perceive* amateurs to be less qualified and more extreme than experienced candidates and elect them regardless

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[5]See Appendix S2.6 for full analysis and results.

of such perceptions. That is, voter standards for experience have decreased. In this section, I directly measure perceptions of and demand for qualification for political office. I conduct two studies: a survey experiment and a regression discontinuity design. Overall, the results suggest a high demand for qualification across all levels of government, but one strongly mediated by partisan and policy considerations, consistent with voter tolerance for lack of qualification being a function of the relative weight placed on preference alignment but not an absolute preference for inexperience.

Study 1: Survey Experiment

I fielded an online survey experiment via CloudResearch Connect from May 3-5, 2024, with a sample of 2,403 respondents.[6] The experiment consisted of two linked components: a series of vignettes measuring perceptions of qualifications and a series of forced-choice tasks measuring preferences for qualifications. By separately measuring perceptions and preferences in this way, I avoid shortcomings of previous designs where preferences confound perceptions. Across all components, respondents were randomly assigned to an *office level condition* (federal, state, or local), which determined the political office for which hypothetical candidates appearing in the design were contesting (Congress, State Senate, or Mayor). Additionally, by randomizing the presence of partisan and policy information in the forced choice task, I can directly measure the mediating effect preference alignment has on perceived qualification.

Vignette Tasks

Each respondent received 8 short vignettes describing candidates for political office (determined by the respondent office level condition). Each vignette randomized a number of candidate attributes: gender, previous occupation, length in previous occupation, age, education level, and number of children. A full description of attributes and their settings

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[6]Target quotas were set for U.S. residents (100%), gender (50% male/female), and partisanship (50% Democrat/Republican). Respondents who fail a pre-treatment attention check are excluded from the final sample. The experiment and associated analyses are pre-registered at OSF.

is given in Table 2.[7] For example, a respondent might see the following vignette for one candidate (randomized components bolded):

Richard Murphy is a candidate for **Congress**. Prior to running for office, **he** was **briefly** a **journalist**. **He** is **31** years old, has earned a **Bachelor's** Degree, and has **2 children**.

Table 2: Vignette Attribute Levels

Attribute	Levels
Office	Congress / State Senate / Mayor
Name	Susan Long / Jennifer Morgan / Robert Hughes / Barbara Cox / Linda Price / Charles Phillips / Mark Wood / Richard Murphy
Gender	Male / Female
Occupation	Unemployed / Bartender / Journalist / Small business owner / Lawyer / City council member / State assembly member
Tenure	Brief / Half of Career / Most of Career
Education	High School / Bachelor's / Master's / JD
Age	Random Uniform: 27-72
Children	Random Uniform: 0-3

After reading each vignette, respondents were asked to rate how qualified they believe the candidate to be for office on a scale of 0-100, where 0 is extremely unqualified, 100 is extremely qualified, and 50 is neither qualified nor unqualified.

Forced-Choice Tasks

After completing the vignette tasks, respondents complete 4 forced-choice tasks resembling a conjoint design. In each task, respondents see information about two candidates competing for the office of the respondent's assigned office level condition and were asked which candidate they prefer for that office. Each hypothetical candidate is given demographic attributes pulled from the previously completed vignettes (with the order randomly shuffled), meaning

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[7]Names were selected to be similar in the probability of belonging to a particular racial group, as determined by Rosenman et al. (2023). Gender is set downstream of name randomization. The education level of profiles with the occupation of Lawyer is set to JD.

respondents have already logged *pre-treatment* the level of perceived qualification for each candidate.

I directly manipulate policy and party information as mediating forces on the effect of perceived qualification. Respondents are randomly assigned information about the candidates' partisanship and policy stances. Specifically, each respondent is assigned to 2 conditions in a 2 × 2 factorial design (meaning two forced-choice tasks correspond to one condition and remaining two correspond to another). The two independent variables are party information and policy information, with the respective levels being that the information is shown or not shown. For example, those in the pure control group (no additional party or policy information) see only the personal attributes of each candidate. Those in the party and policy information condition see both the partisanship and policy stances of a candidate in addition to their personal attributes. For the party condition, candidates are given either a Democrat or Republican party label. For the policy condition, each candidate is shown agreeing or disagreeing with 3 policy positions associated with the respondent's office condition. An example profile from the party and policy condition is given in Figure 5.

Experimental Results

The vignette experiment (n = 19,224 respondent-candidates) yields substantial variation in perceptions of qualification both between and within subjects. On average, respondents view candidates in the vignette experiment as slightly more qualified than not (mean = 53, median = 58) and see large differences between candidates (mean range = 55, median = 56).

This variation persists across individual attribute levels, shown in Figure 6. While median levels of perceived qualification (shown as vertical lines) are similar for attribute categories within age, children, gender, and occupation gender, such levels belie significant variation in how those attributes are perceived. Even for education and occupation, which induce the greatest differences in perceived qualification between categories, the distributions encompass the extremities of the scale.

Candidate A		Candidate B
Office: State Senate		
Republican	Party	Democrat
Male	Gender	Male
66	Age	44
Master's	Education	Master's
State assembly member	Last Occupation	City council member
Half of Career	Occupation Length	Brief
0 children	Children	3 children
Don't establish a state-run pre-kindergarten program	State Pre-K	Don't establish a state-run pre-kindergarten program
Don't ban abortions	Abortion	Ban abortions, except in the cases of rape, incest, or to protect the life of the mother
Don't require body cameras for state police	Body Cameras	Require body cameras for state police

Figure 5: Example forced-choice task. This respondent is assigned to the **state** office level condition and the party and policy information conditions.

Having held prior elected office induces the greatest increase in perceived qualification. Candidates with prior occupation listed as state assembly member or city council member had median perceived qualification scores of 70 (means 67 and 65, respectively). This increase (and the effects of other attributes more broadly) is consistent across all office conditions; the office being sought by the candidate does not moderate any attribute effect on perceived qualification.

I now address my key question: how does this perceived qualification affect preferences for candidates? Using the perceived qualification from candidate vignettes, I implement
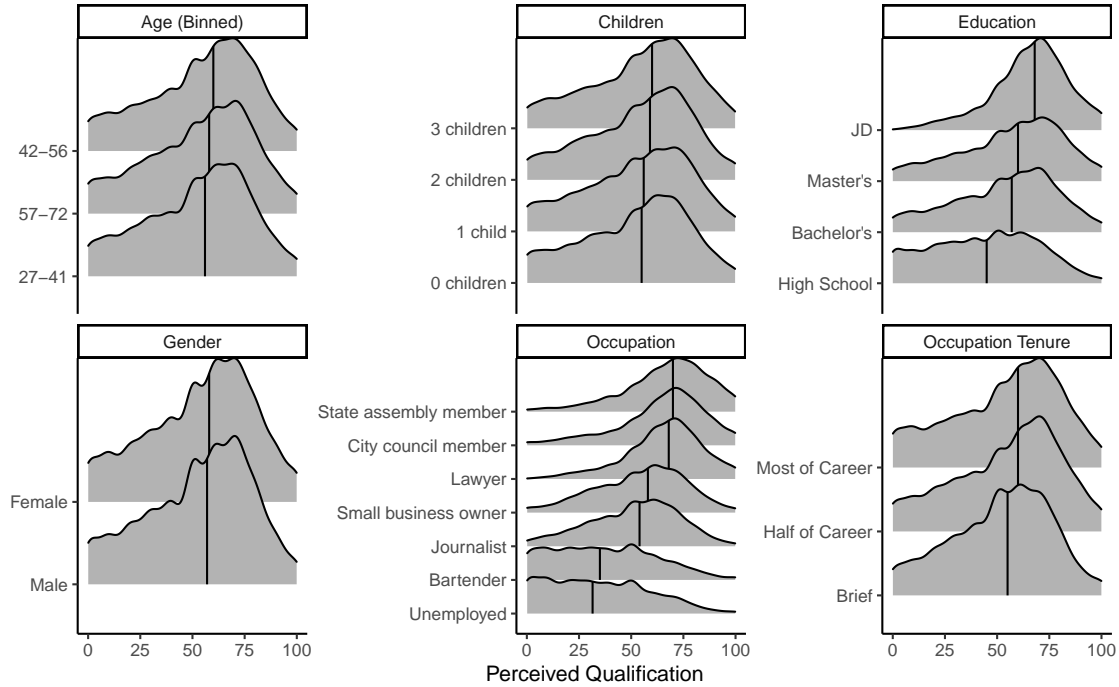
Figure 6: Previous candidate occupation and education are the strongest determinants of perceived qualification, but there is substantial variation across all attribute levels. Results are pooled across office conditions.

a binary coding for each profile in the forced-choice design indicating whether the profile was perceived to have greater qualification. I regress the binary outcome of whether the profile was selected on a fully saturated set of interactions between binary indicators for greater perceived qualification, the presence of party information, and the presence of policy information.[8]

Respondents prefer qualification, but the effect of qualification is strongly mediated by the presence of partisan and policy information. Figure 7 presents the results using two interpretative frameworks. In the left panel, I present the set of effects described by Acharya et al. (2018) for summarising causal mechanisms in a factorial design. The average treatment effect (ATE) is the unconditional effect of higher perceived qualification on candidate choice, meaning across all treatment arms respondents were 27 percentage points more likely to select the candidate they perceived as more qualified. The average controlled direct effect

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[8]Standard errors are clustered by respondent (accounting for the presence of multiple choice tasks per respondent).

(ACDE) is the effect of higher perceived qualification holding mediators fixed to the control (no information) condition. When no partisan or policy information is shown, respondents are 49 percentage points more likely to select their more qualified candidate.
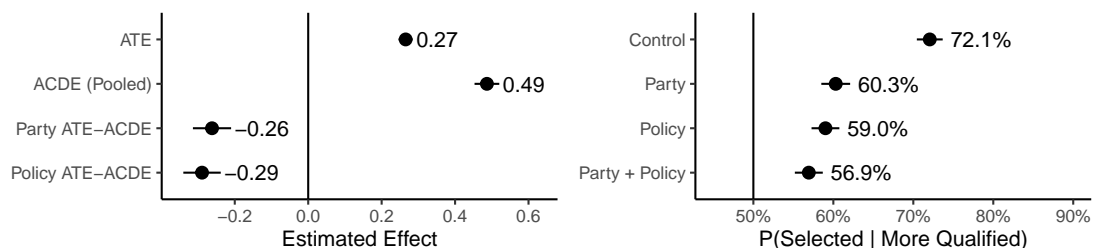

Figure 7: Perceived qualification positively affects candidate selection, but the presence of policy and party information strongly mediates the effect. Estimated effects from forced-choice experiment. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.

The difference between the ATE and ACDE, known as the "eliminated effect," is therefore an indication of the degree to which the mediators play roles in the causal mechanisms of the treatment. This is simply the change in the treatment effect of qualification when partisan or policy information is provided. These effects appear at least as large as the ATE for both policy and party information, suggesting perceived qualification is heavily mediated by countervailing pressures. Bluntly, the overall causal effect of perceived qualification on vote choice cannot be understood independent of partisan and policy information; at least half of the total effect is explained by mediators.

A more intuitive presentation of the same set of effects is given in the right panel, where each estimate is simply percentage of cases where the more qualified candidate was selected for each cell of the 2x2 design, or the probability of a profile being selected given they are perceived as more qualified. When no additional policy or party information is given, the probability of selection is high, at 72.1%. This drops steeply to 59-60% when policy and party information are present (respectively), and declines only slightly further to 56.9% with the presence of both policy and party information. Notably, however, the effect of perceived qualification is not fully eliminated under any condition; respondents incorporate all information given to them in their choices.
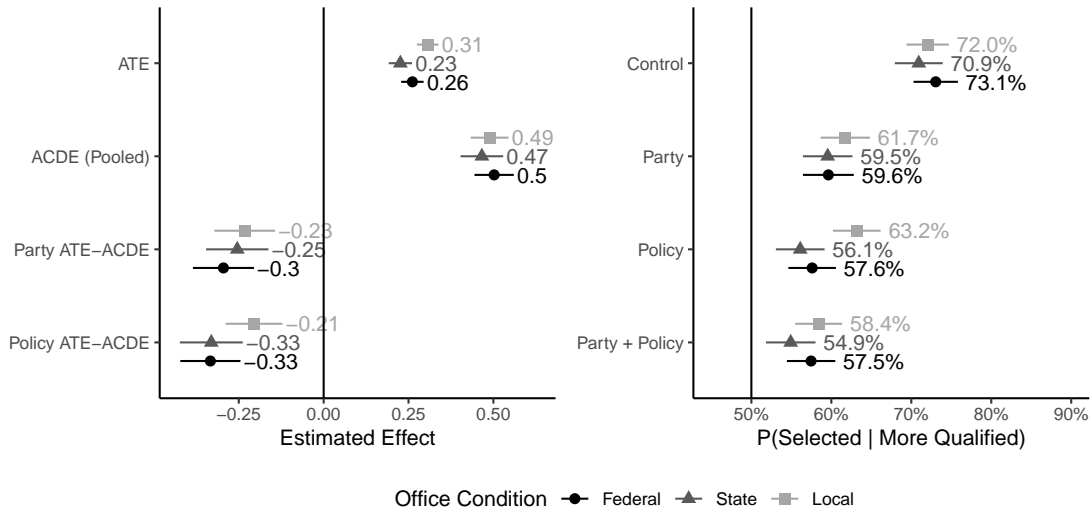
Figure 8: Across all office conditions, perceived qualification positively affects candidate selection, but the presence of policy and party information strongly mediates the effect. Estimated effects from forced-choice experiment, by office. The 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.

There appear to be no substantial differences in both the effects of perceived qualification and the strength of policy and party information as mediators across levels of government (shown in Figure 8). The small difference between the local ATE and the state and federal ATEs appears entirely driven by the controlled direct effect of local policy information. While one interpretation may be that policy information is less useful in a local context, another equally plausible interpretation is the policy items included in the local office condition are simply less salient than those in the federal and state conditions. This may be true of almost all local policy debates as politics becomes more "nationalized" (Hopkins 2018), and previous experimental work suggests the average local policy has a smaller effect on candidate selection than federal or state policies (Holliday and Rudkin 2023). Regardless, the effect of perceived qualification survives at fairly similar levels across all conditions, suggesting differences in levels of qualification among elected officials across levels of government are more likely a function of supply-side than demand-side forces. All else being equal, respondents prefer qualified candidates as much in local office as in national office.

To more fully understand how partisanship mediates the effect of qualification, I condition

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the results on two respondent-level pre-treatment indicators of partisan affinity: affective polarization (split into terciles) and strength of partisanship (split into strong versus weak or lean). If polarization increases tolerance for low-quality candidates, we should expect to see the probability of selecting the higher-qualification candidate to be more strongly attenuated in the conditions with the addition of partisan or party-adjacent information.
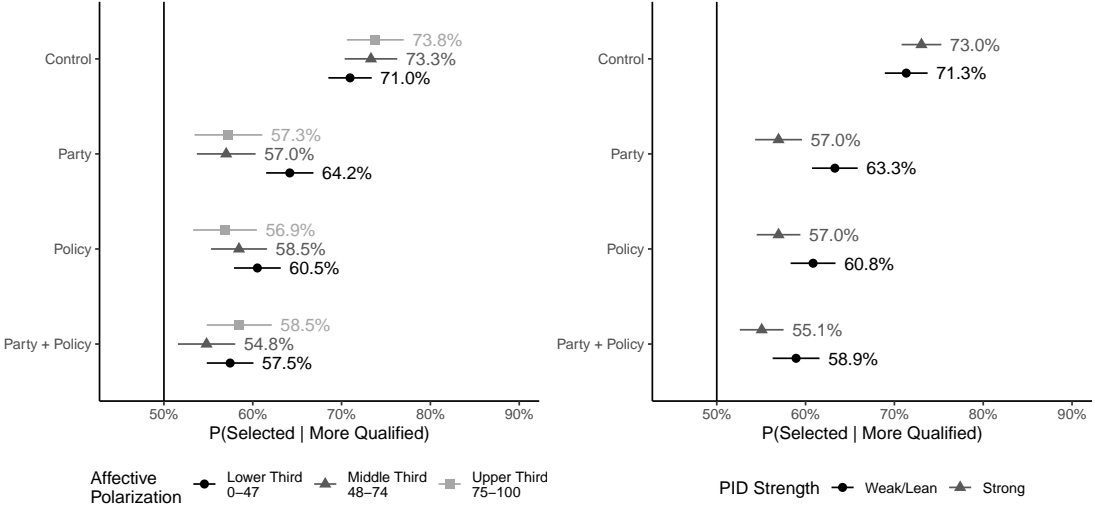

Figure 9: Affective polarization and strength of party identification condition the effects of partisan and policy information on perceived qualification and candidate selection. Estimated effects from forced-choice experiment. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.

The results (presented in Figure 9) give suggestive evidence supporting the polarization mechanism. The least affectively polarized respondents (bottom third) are significantly more likely to select the more qualified candidate than more affectively polarized respondents (by roughly 7 percentage points) when party information is present. Less affectively polarized respondents are also slightly more likely to select the more qualified candidate than the most affectively polarized (top third) when policy information is present. When both party and policy information is present, however, affective polarization has no effect on candidate selection. A similar pattern emerges among strong partisans. Strong partisans are less likely to select the more qualified candidate than weak partisans or leaners when any information

in addition to candidate characteristics is given.[9]

These experimental results show how respondents balance perceived qualification with preference divergence when selecting between candidates across different informational settings and electoral jurisdictions. The presence of policy and party information heavily attenuates the effect of candidate qualification, and does so more strongly among the most affectively polarized and strong partisans, but it does not *eliminate* qualification's effect. Moreover, the effect of perceived qualification is consistent across jurisdictions, suggesting a through-line in American political behavior is a preference for more qualified candidates. Voters' standards for evaluating candidates, then, do not appear to have dropped significantly.

Study 2: Regression Discontinuity

I augment the results of the survey experiment using a close-election regression discontinuity design (Lee 2008) to measure the causal effect of selecting an amateur candidate in a primary election on general election voteshare (hereafter RDD). This functionally serves as the observational equivalent to the ATE of perceived qualification in the survey experiment; how much better do experienced candidates do in electoral settings than inexperienced candidates? All else being equal in a principle-agent framework, amateur candidates should perform worse than their experienced counterparts.

Simple observational designs comparing amateur and non-amateur general election margins fall victim to classic selection problems; the emergence of an amateur victor is likely confounded by characteristics of the district or contest. RDD methods exploit uncertainty in election outcomes by constraining the estimation of a treatment effect to instances where treatment assignment is as-if-random. As the margin of victory decreases, the probability

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[9]In Appendix S2.2, I consider observational evidence for whether polarization mediates amateur success in state legislative elections. The results complement those presented here and are consistent with risk aversion moderating the expected utility of amateur candidates across different contexts; states more strongly dominated by one party have fewer amateur winners, whereas districts with more uneven partisan distributions elect fewer amateurs.

of treatment assignment (in this instance, having an amateur primary victor) more closely approximates a coin-flip. Importantly, the estimated effect can be interpreted as the causal effect of an amateur candidate winning a primary, *not* the effect of being an amateur (Grumbach and Sahn 2020; Marshall 2024). Other candidate characteristics plausibly co-vary with inexperience, meaning amateurism must be considered as a "bundled treatment" like gender or race.

I utilize a sample of partisan state legislative primaries (n = 567) wherein a single seat was up for election, the primary was contested by at least one amateur candidate and one non-amateur candidate, and the general election involved at least two candidates. I focus on the contemporary period of 2014-2016 where data availability allows for sufficiently precise effect estimation. Similar to other RDDs using candidate characteristics in legislative primaries (Bucchianeri 2018; White et al. 2024), the "running" variable is the margin in victory for the best-performing candidate without prior elected experience, ranging from -100 to 100 with 0 as the cutoff. Cases just over 0 are instances when an amateur candidate barely won their primary, and cases just below are those when they barely lost. The dependent variables is the general election voteshare of the winning primary candidate.

I find that when a party nominates an amateur candidate, the party wins *lower* voteshares in the general election. Results are presented graphically in Figure 10, with non-amateur primary winners to the left of the cutoff and amateur primary winners to the right. I estimate the nomination of an amateur candidate causes a 15.3 (95% CI -23.7, -6.9) percentage point reduction in general election voteshare.[10]

While this finding suggests voters have a preference for experience, it is important to note that the estimated effect may also in part be driven by candidate qualities independent of voter demand. Having never successfully run a campaign before, amateurs who win their primaries may be less well equipped to manage a general election campaign. However, at least in the sample analyzed here, the mere existence of a primary typically indicates

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[10]This result is robust to alternative bandwidth and polynomial specifications, presented in Appendix S2.5.
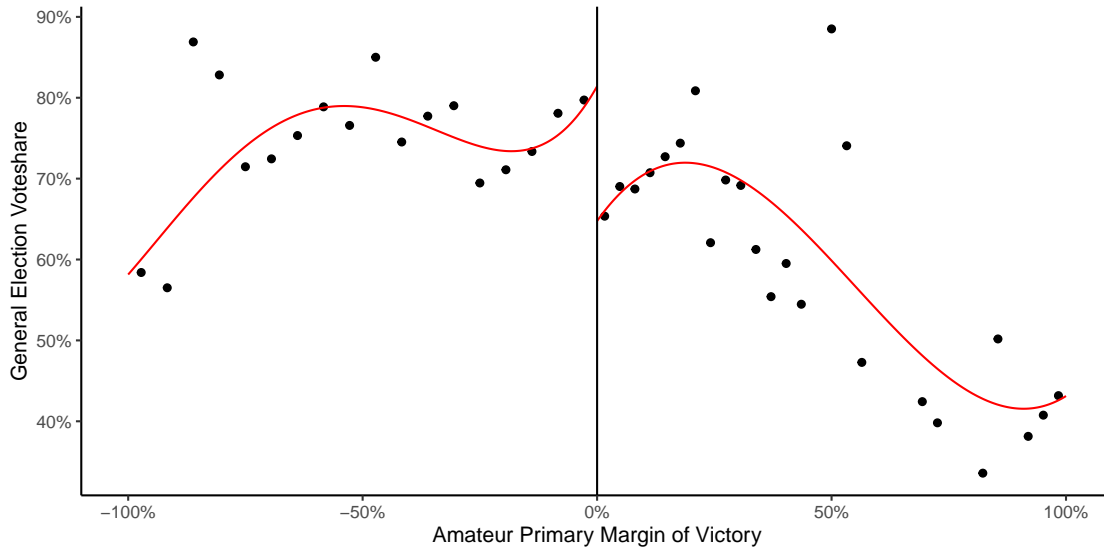
Figure 10: Barely selecting an amateur candidate in a primacy race causes a 15.1 percentage point drop in general-election vote-share (95% CI: -23.7, -6.9). Estimated using optimal bandwidth of 23.7, triangular kernel, and linear polynomial (quartic polynomial plotted for visual clarity over the support of data). Black dots represent binned means.

candidates are competing in favorable general election environments, as a majority of state legislative primaries and many general elections are uncontested. Indeed, by subsetting to only contests with primary elections, Figure 10 shows most primary winners easily clear the 50% threshold in the general election. This caveat is consistent with the experimental findings that preferences for qualification are heavily mediated by partisan considerations; voters generally prefer candidates with elected experience, but also strongly prefer ideological alignment. This is not to suggest standards for candidate evaluation have dropped; voters are forced to balance multidimensional preferences when candidate choices are finite, and appear to be doing so in rational manners.

Conclusion

The infamy of several notable amateur politicians in Congress is understandably concerning to many political commentators; trust in government is at an all-time low (Pew Research Center 2024), as is trust in the government's ability to effectively solve problems (Saad 2020).

But amateurs alone do not appear more prevalent or responsible for the current maladies of U.S. government, and voters do not fundamentally prefer inexperience over experience. Amateurism is a durable feature of U.S. politics across all branches and all levels, which may be more deeply rooted in the weak nature of American political parties' abilities to select their preferred experienced candidates, especially compared to stronger party systems (Berz and Jankowski 2022). Amateurs themselves may also be at times preferable to voters, not because of a lack of quality, but because they are equally if not more qualified than experienced candidates.

Amateurism, like so many parts of contemporary U.S. politics, appears strongly linked to macro-level forces of partisanship and polarization. While voter demand for experience remains high, partisan considerations are much more indicative of desirable candidate "type," meaning voters are more likely to tolerate inexperienced candidates. This is a double-edged sword for ambitious political amateurs. In places where an incumbent is misaligned with their district, amateurs have a strong chance of success. But where incumbents are strongly in-line with their constituents and elections lack competition, outside candidates will likely have a harder time gaining an electoral foothold. Future research should consider how voters perhaps distinctively evaluate responsiveness of amateur representatives.

Currently, amateur politicians appear no worse at executing the functions of office than those with prior elected experience. This finding should be evaluated within context, however. In the current Congress, *no* individual legislator is particularly effective by virtue of split institutional control and tight vote margins unable to overcome minority filibusters. Furthermore, leadership positions in U.S. legislative bodies have long been occupied by the most experienced legislators in the chamber. It is possible, then, that the "legislative leviathan" loses its power if leadership is overrun with amateur politicians (Cox and Mc-Cubbins 1993). Future work should consider how amateur politicians rise through the ranks in legislative bodies and how selection criteria for such leadership positions has (or has not) changed over time.

By giving a holistic picture of (in)experience in U.S. elections, this paper clarifies our general understanding of the prevalence of and preferences for amateurs across a wide variety of contexts. This broad approach, however, is not without limitations. Namely, specific, micro-level forces within chambers and states that may influence amateur success are beyond the scope of this paper. Additionally, while I am able to measure broad-based political experience for a select set of politicians, I am constrained by data availability in my ability to extrapolate to other cases. Future work should expand upon the biographical sketches of elected officials, focus efforts outside of the U.S. Congress, and critically rethink prior elected experience as a measure of candidate quality.

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Supplementary Appendix for Amateurs: A (Mostly) Stable, Undesired, but Benign Presence in American Politics

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Contents

S1 Survey Experiment

S1.1 Ethics

I declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. Human subjects research in this paper was reviewed and approved by Stanford IRB. I affirm that this paper adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subjects Research and note no exceptions to APSA's principles.

Informed consent for participants was obtained at the beginning of they survey. Respondents received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the survey, that they were taking part in a research study, and all relevant information necessary to obtain informed consent. Only after being presented the information and agreeing to continue were respondents admitted to the survey.

Survey respondents were compensated for their participation through CloudResearch Connect. Pre-test participants were compensated $0.50, and participants of the main experiment were compensated $1.00. Both payment amounts were set to be at least the equivalent of the federal minimum wage for the amount of time required to complete the survey.

S1.2 Pre-Testing

A pre-test was conducted on a sample of 250 respondents recruited through CloudResearch Connect using national demographic targeting to determine demographic and occupational backgrounds of candidates likely to induce variance in perceived classification. For each characteristics, respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert scale whether it made a candidate more or less qualified (Much more qualified / More qualified / Neither more nor less qualified / Less qualified / Much less qualified). Results are shown in Figure S1.
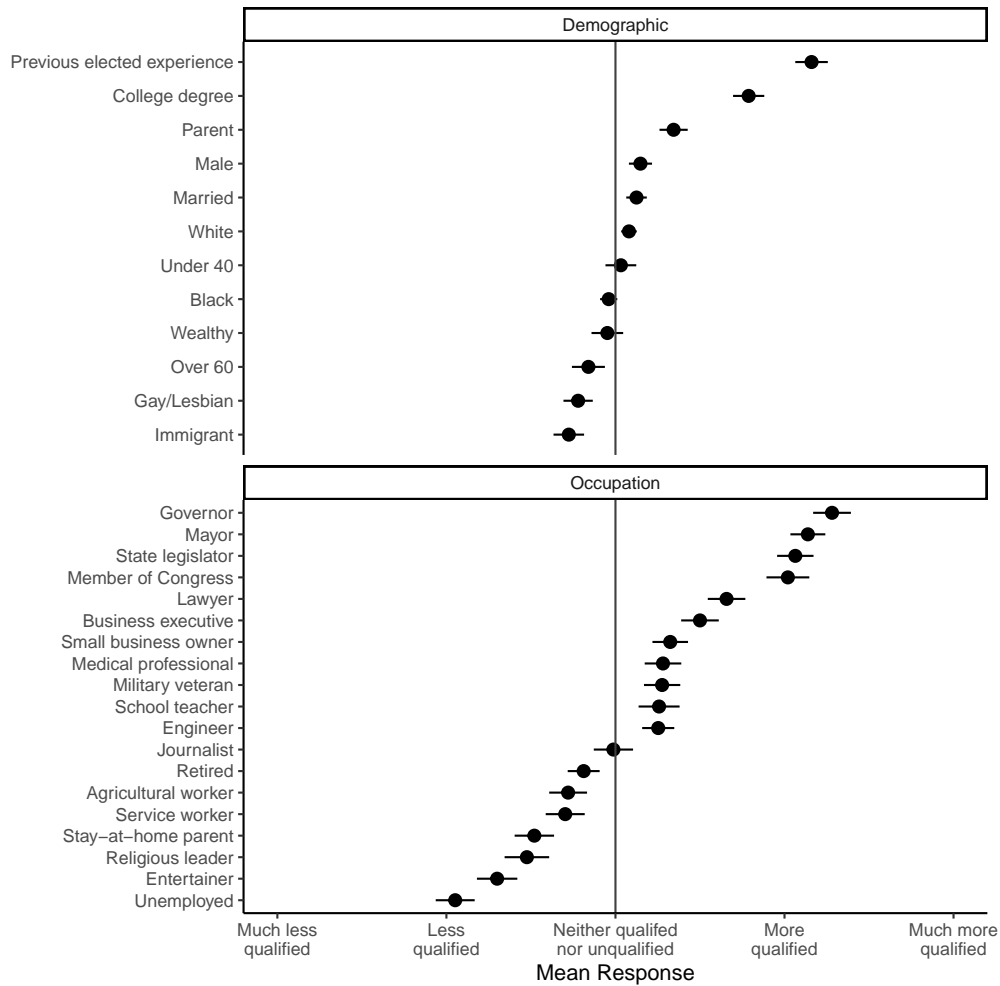
Figure S1: Pre-test results for perceived qualification for various demographic and occupational candidate characteristics.

S1.3 Power

For the individual characteristics of the vignette study, I assume 2400 respondents each complete 8 vignette tasks and are randomized to one of three office conditions and divided evenly among occupation groups (the most characteristic with the largest number of divisions). Using a two-sample, two-sided t-test and assuming a necessary power of 80% at a significance level of 95% yields a Cohen's d of 0.12, considered smaller than a "small" treatment effect.

For calculation of eliminated effect power, I simulate the responses of 2400 respondents over 100 replications, assuming each respondent is randomly assigned to a policy treatment condition. I randomize a qualification score drawn from a normal distribution with mean 0 and standard deviation 10. I generate a probability of candidate selection using the function:

$$U = 50 + 10 * Qual - PolicyPresent + A * Qual * PolicyPresent + \epsilon$$

Where $Qual$ is a binary indicator of whether the candidate profile is perceived as more qualified than the other, $PolicyPresent$ is a binary indicator of whether the respondent was assigned to the policy treatment condition in this pairing, A is the eliminated effect size, and ϵ is random noise drawn from a normal distribution with mean 0 and standard deviation 3. I then estimate the interaction term and note its significance, clustering standard errors at the respondent level, and repeating for $A \in \{0, 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2\}$. Resulting power is shown in Figure S2, indicating a well-powered study for detecting even very small effect sizes.
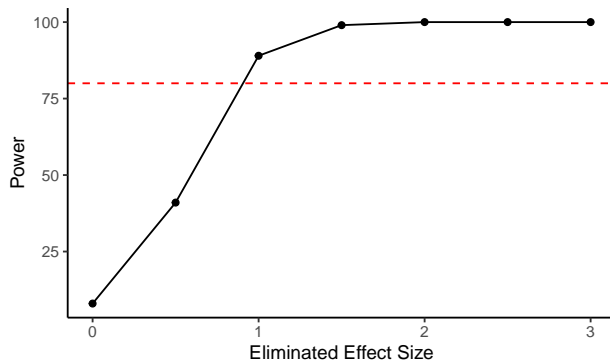

Figure S2: Power calculation for eliminated effect size.

S1.4 Attention Check

Respondents completed a simple attention check embedded within the policy position matrix in the main experiment. The matrix item stated "Please select 'Disagree' for this item to confirm you are paying attention." Respondents who failed the attention check (n = 8) were removed from the final analysis sample. Previous research on the attentiveness of CloudResearch Connect respondents indicates this high attentiveness is typical of the sample (Stagnaro et al. 2024). In this experimental design, undiagnosed inattentiveness biases effects toward 0.

S1.5 Policy Items

The policy items shown in Table S1 were shown to respondents pre-treatment to indicate prior agreement, then randomized in the policy condition respondents to be either a positive or negative setting.

Table S1: Policies used in forced-choice experiment

Level	Policy
Federal	Deport all undocumented immigrants Decrease the size of the U.S. military Provide government-run health insurance
State	Require body cameras for state police Ban abortions, except in cases of rape, incest, or to protect the life of the mother Establish a state-run pre-kindergarten program
Local	Enact a "Sanctuary City" policy forbidding local authorities from cooperating with federal agents on immigration issues Substantially increase spending on public transit Substantially increase spending on affordable housing

S1.6 Respondent Characteristics

Target quotes were set for U.S. respondents (100%), gender (50% male/female), and political party (50% Democrat/Republican). Final sample characteristics were 49.2% male, 50.8% female, 55% Democrat, and 45% Republican. Average survey duration was 6 minute and 6 seconds, and median duration was 4 minute 55 seconds. Survey completion rate was 97.68%, with a bounce rate of 2.32%. All respondents received full compensation. Other demographic data not used in the analyses of this paper are available upon request.

S1.7 Additional Analyses
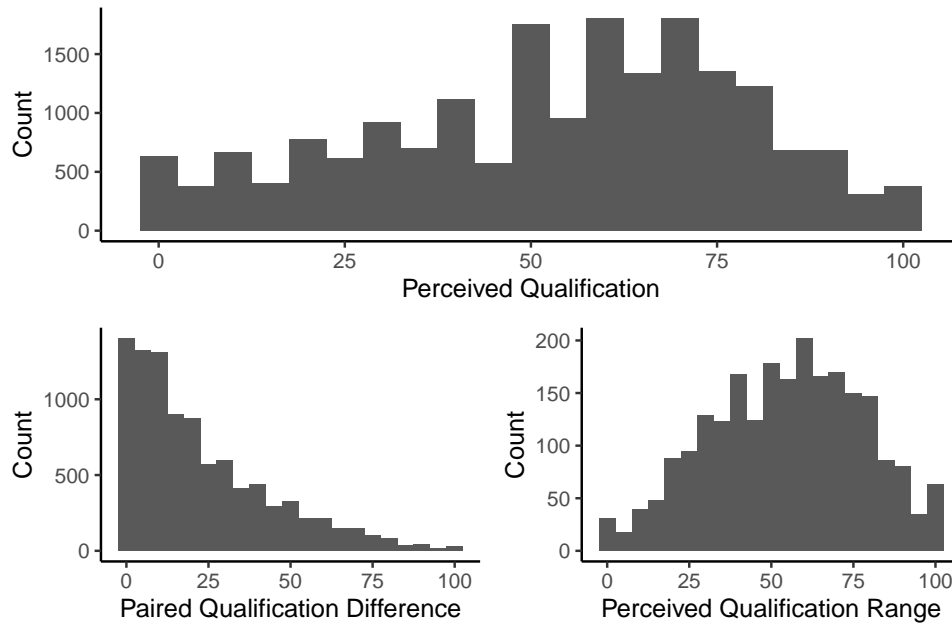
Figure S3: Distribution of perceived qualification for all vignette profiles (top panel), difference in perceived qualification in forced choice pairs (bottom left), and respondent-level ranges (maximum-minimum) of perceived qualification (bottom right).
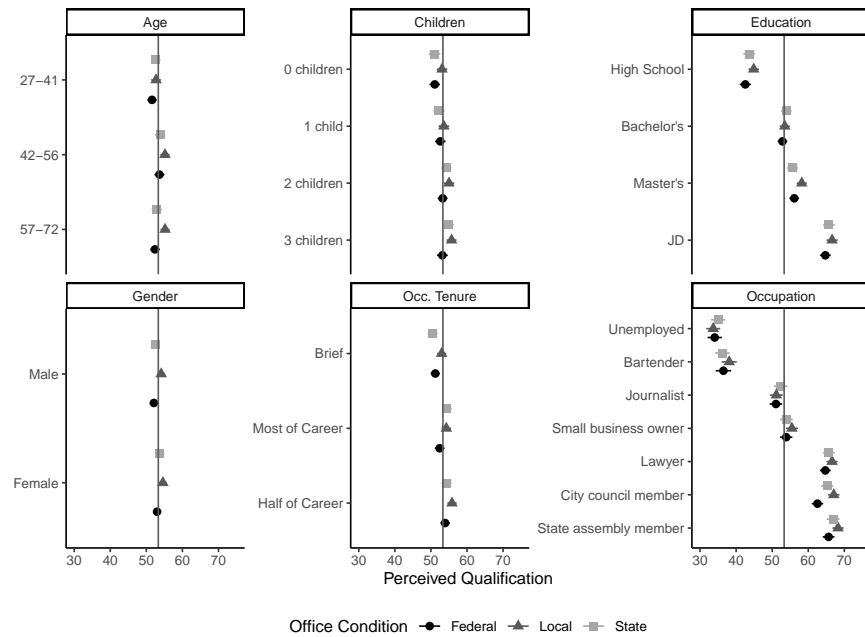

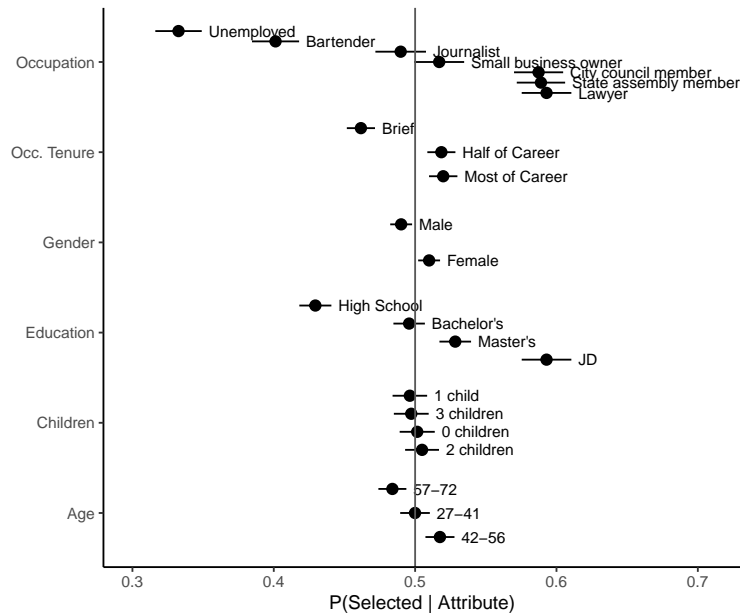Figure S4: Perceived qualification of vignette profiles conditional on office condition.

Figure S5: Probability of selecting a candidate profile in the forced-choice experiment conditional on the inclusion of particular characteristics. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.
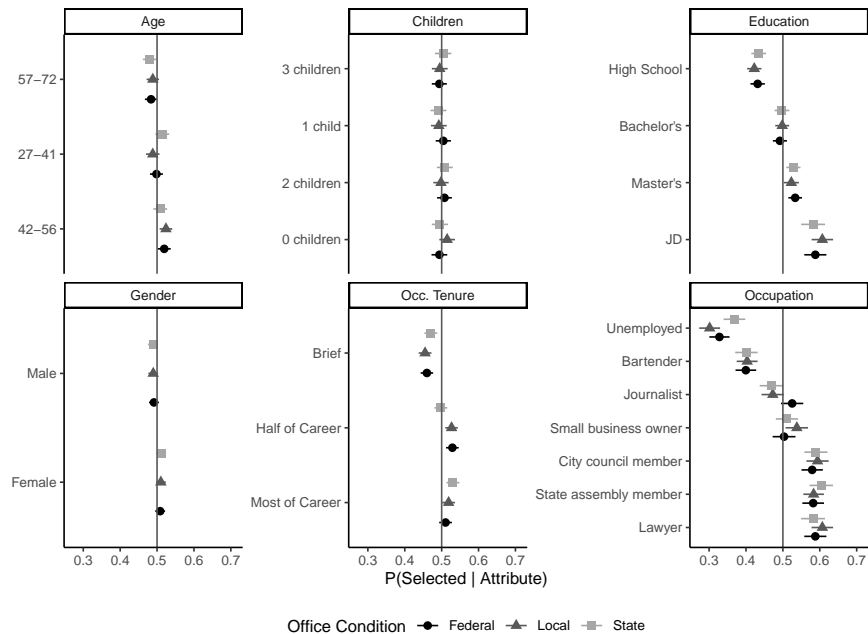
Figure S6: Probability of selecting a candidate profile in the forced-choice experiment conditional on the inclusion of particular characteristics and office condition. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.
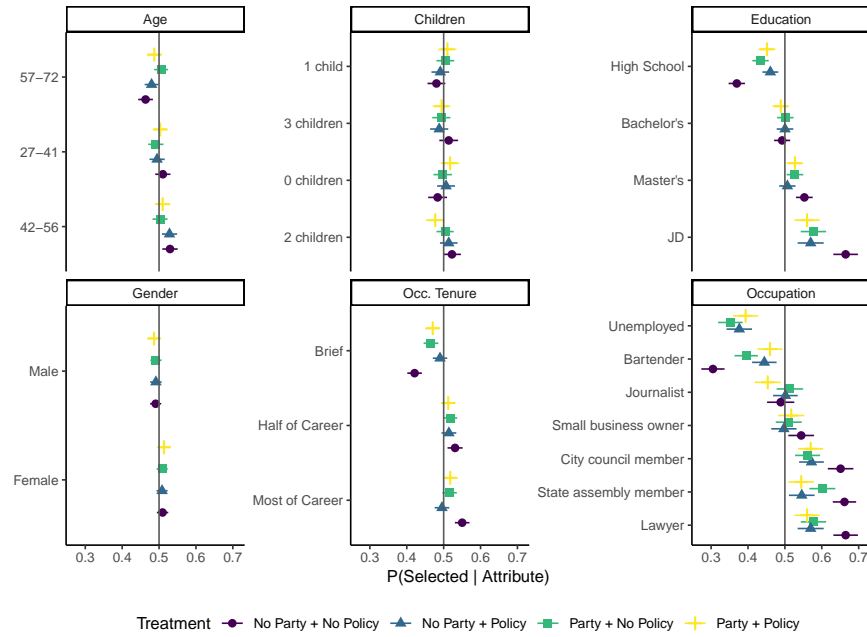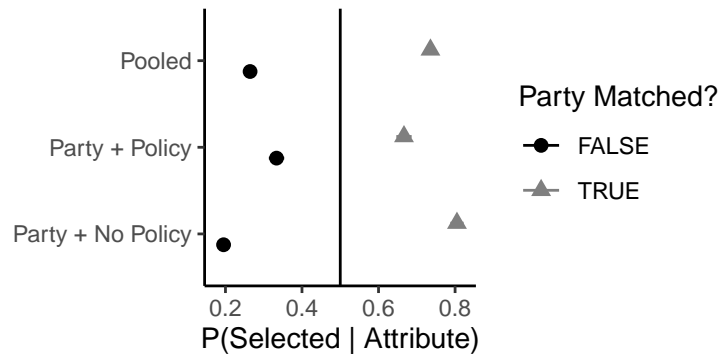
Figure S7: Probability of selecting a candidate profile in the forced-choice experiment conditional on the inclusion of particular characteristics and treatment condition. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.

Figure S8: Probability of selecting a candidate profile in the forced-choice experiment conditional on treatment condition and if the partisanship of the profile matched the partisanship of the respondent. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.
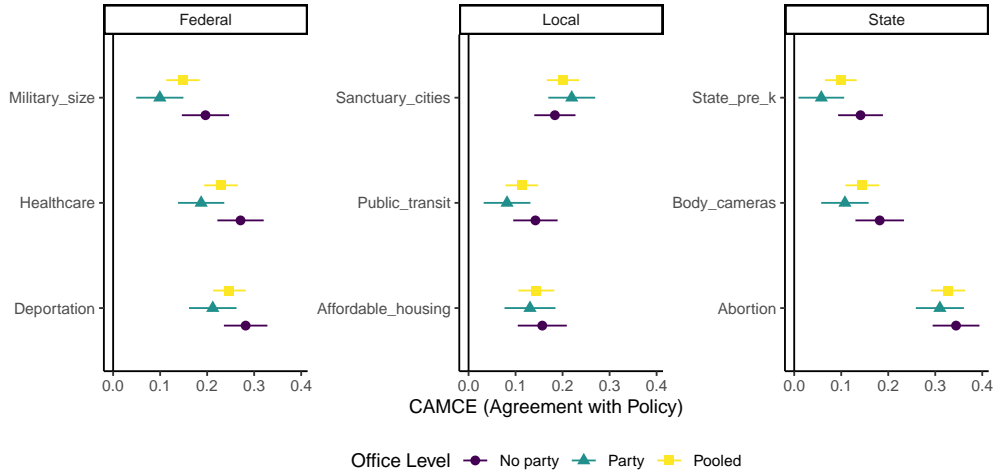
Figure S9: CAMCE for agreement with policy setting, conditional on treatment condition. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.
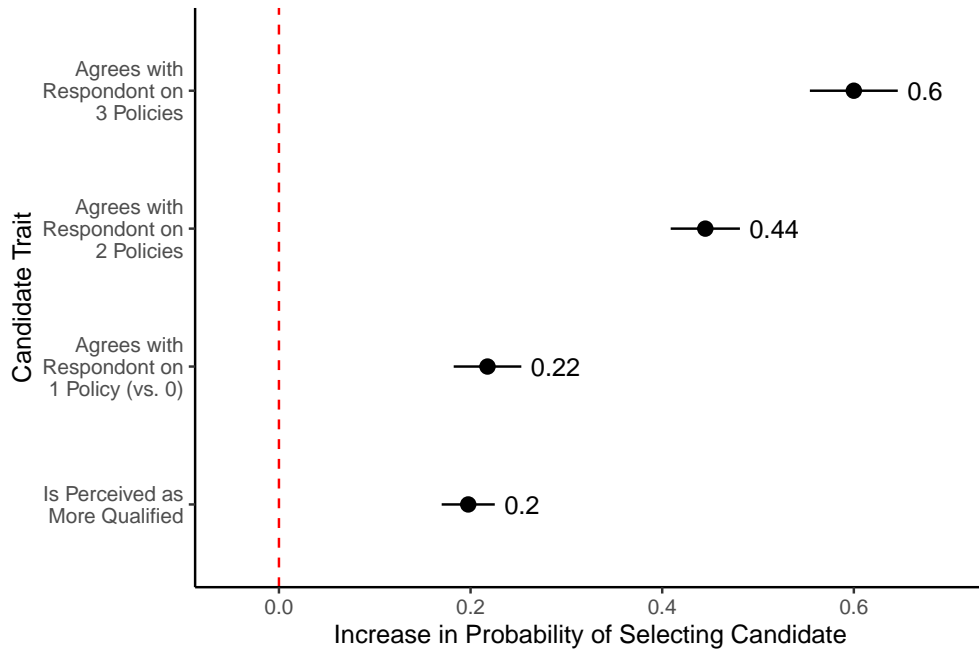

Figure S10: Effect of policy agreement compared to the effect of perceived qualification advantage. 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by respondent.

S2 Observational Results

S2.1 Sample Details

Table S2: Data characteristics of winning candidate samples

Dataset	Offices	Years Analyzed	N Candidates
Porter and Treul (2024)	Congress (HoR)	1980-2020	9,057
Algara and Bae (2024)	Congress (Senate)	1980-2022	764 (elections)
Klarner (2018)	State Legislative	1989-2021	113,661
de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023)	Local	1989-2021	64,356
Holliday (2024)	Statewide	1980-2024	653

S2.2 Partisan Context

The experimental results suggest strength of partisanship and polarization moderate the effect of candidate qualification on selection. This analysis was limited, however, to respondent-level measures of such attitudes. Extrapolating to the outcomes of elections enriches our understanding of qualification's effect by situating individual-level partisanship within varied contexts. Two macro-level forces in particular shape partisan context; the partisan leaning of the district within which an election is held, and the partisan leaning of the institutional composition of the elected body. For example, a state legislative district may lean solidly Republican, but the legislature may be solidly Democratic.

Both forces plausibly shape how previous legislative experience is received. In a district with more even partisan leaning, small idiosyncrasies are more likely to prove decisive in an election, perhaps encouraging the emergence of candidates of greater quality that appear more "electable" (Abramowitz 1989; Funk 1997). Such districts are also where the indirect benefits of candidate quality (such as the ability to run an organized, well-funded campaign) are pivotal for success in the general election (Canon 1993; Squire and Wright 1990). Conversely, in contexts where institutional control is closely contested, experience is perhaps a secondary concern to winning additional seats. As control grows more lopsided, the pressure to elected a co-partisan at all costs diminishes while the pressure to produce quality legislation increases.

It is difficult to disentangle these forces with Congressional elections, as the institutional context has been generally closer to even partisan splits in the contemporary period. However, utilizing state legislative elections allows for variation in both district-level and chamber-level partisan leaning. Restricting my sample of state legislative elections to the most recent set of elections (2008 onward), I match each election-district with a non-incumbent winner to district-level estimates of Democratic two-party presidential vote share (Warshaw and Tausanovitch 2022) and state-level measures of the most recent chamber composition. For each measure, I compute the absolute partisan leaning of the district/chamber as the absolute difference of the Democratic voteshare/proportion and 0.5; a value of 0 connotes equal partisan balance, and a value of 0.5 connotes complete one-party dominance. I then regress a binary indicator of whether the winner held previous elected office on both measures of partisan leaning.

The results, shown in Figure S11, suggest the two indicators of partisan leaning have countervailing effects. As a district grows more solidly partisan, the probability that a newly elected legislator has prior elected experience diminishes from a maximum of 20.5% to a minimum of 14.7%; a one-standard deviation increase in district partisan lean decreases the probability of elected experience by 1.3 percentage points. Conversely, as a chamber grows more solidly partisan, the same probability increases from a minimum of 16.7% to a maximum of 25.3% (one-standard deviation increase of 1.7 percentage points). These results support a view that experience holds variable value under differing circumstances. When elections are safer, experience offers less value to candidates, and perhaps to voters as well. So too when stakes are higher; an inexperienced majority is likely preferable to an experienced minority in a legislative chamber.
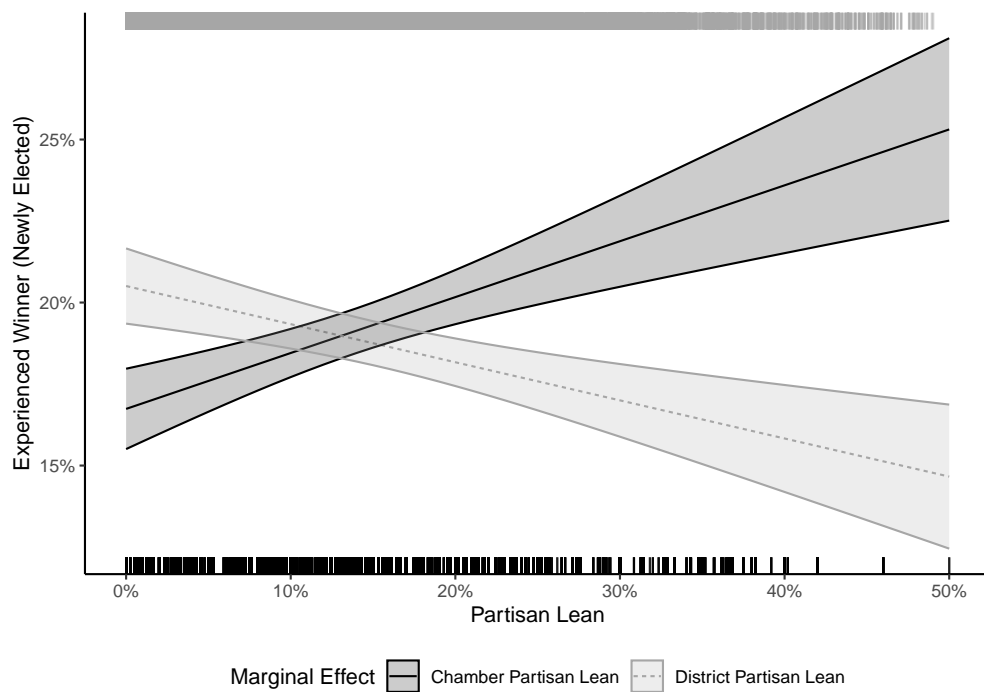
11

Figure S11: Predicted proportion of non-incumbent, winning candidates for state legislature (2008-2021) with prior elected experience, by district and chamber partisan leaning. For each measure of lean, predicted values are calculated holding the other at its median. 95% confidence intervals (robust standard errors). Rugs indicate distribution of data for chamber lean (bottom) and district lean (top).

S2.3   Ideology

The figure below presents ideological differences using DWDIME, a campaign-finance based measure of ideology that predicts roll-call measures (Bonica 2018), meant to ameliorate issues with low intra-party correlations between campaign finance scores and roll-call scores. Due to the limited availability of such scores, however, the estimates are highly uncertain, and in no instance do they give statistically significant results.
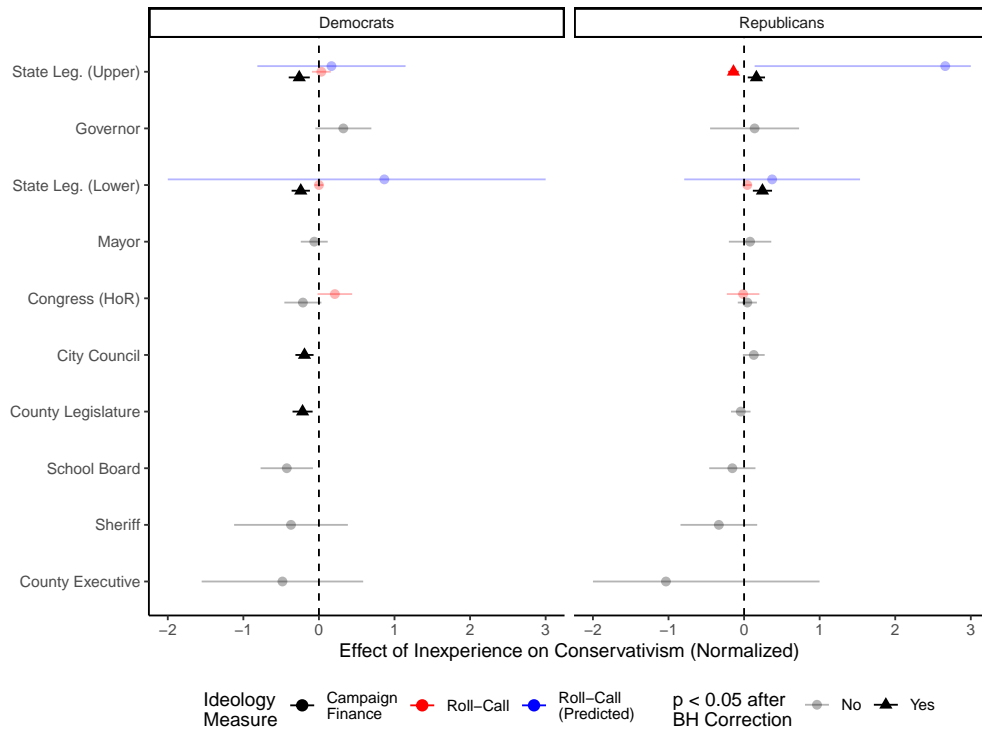

Figure S12: Inexperience does not consistently increase ideological extremity. Models fit using binary operationalization of experience and normalized measures of ideology. Data include only newly elected officials. Two-way fixed effects included for election year and jurisdiction. Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple hypothesis testing applied. 95% confidence intervals.

S2.4 Legislative Effectiveness

These analyses test the possibility that amateurs may be particularly (in)effective in years with larger numbers of amateurs elected, filtering to above-median years and above-75th percentile years from 1980-2022. Results are consistent with those presented in the main manuscript.

Table S3: Prior Experience and Legislative Effectiveness (Over Median Amateur Years)

Dependent Variable:	Effectiveness (Percent Rank)		
Office:	House of Representatives		State Leg.
Measure:	Volden and Wiseman	Chiou and Goplerud	Bucchianeri et al.
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)
Variables			
Prior Experience	-0.0158	-0.0009	-0.0572***
	(0.0168)	(0.0179)	(0.0131)
Fixed-effects			
Election Year Cohort	Yes	Yes	Yes
Seniority	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics			
Observations	3,429	2,473	7,505
R^2	0.06133	0.07850	0.01230
Within R^2	0.00056	2.01×10^{-6}	0.00158

Clustered (elected) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table S4: Prior Experience and Legislative Effectiveness (Over 75th Percentile Amateur Years)

Dependent Variable:	Effectiveness (Percent Rank)		
Office:	House of Representatives		State Leg.
Measure:	Volden and Wiseman	Chiou and Goplerud	Bucchianeri et al.
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)
Variables			
Prior Experience	-0.0278	-0.0084	-0.0435***
	(0.0247)	(0.0264)	(0.0050)
Fixed-effects			
Election Year Cohort	Yes	Yes	Yes
Seniority	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics			
Observations	2,042	1,512	3,679
R^2	0.05108	0.06957	0.01550
Within R^2	0.00155	0.00016	0.00118

Clustered (elected) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

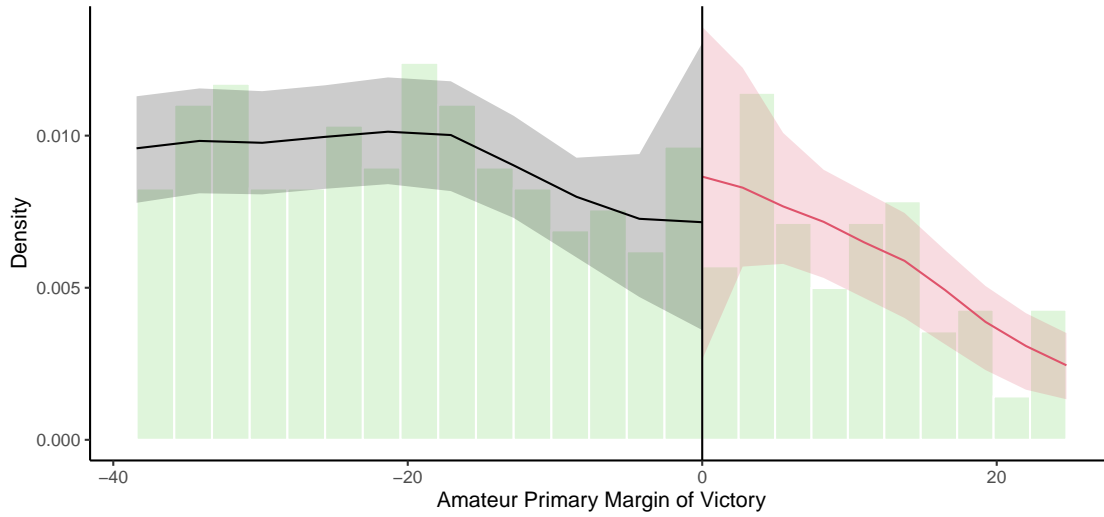## S2.5   Regression Discontinuity Robustness

Figure S13: McCrary Density Test for manipulation of the density of the running variable. Results indicate no violation of the assumption that actors cannot manipulate the running variable to be just barely over or under the cutoff.
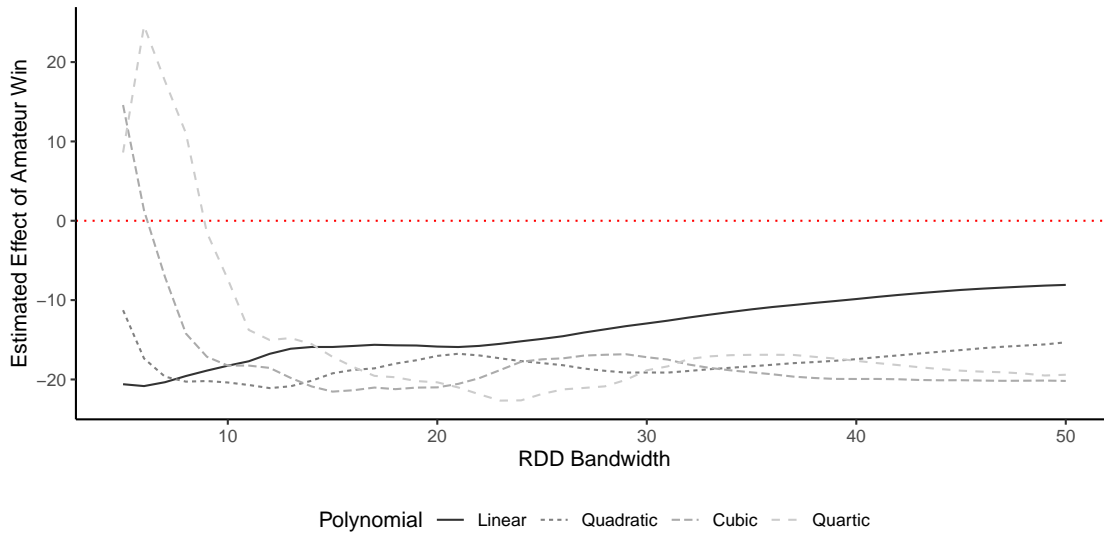

Figure S14: Estimated effect of amateur primary win varying regression discontinuity bandwidth (margin of amateur victory) and polynomial.
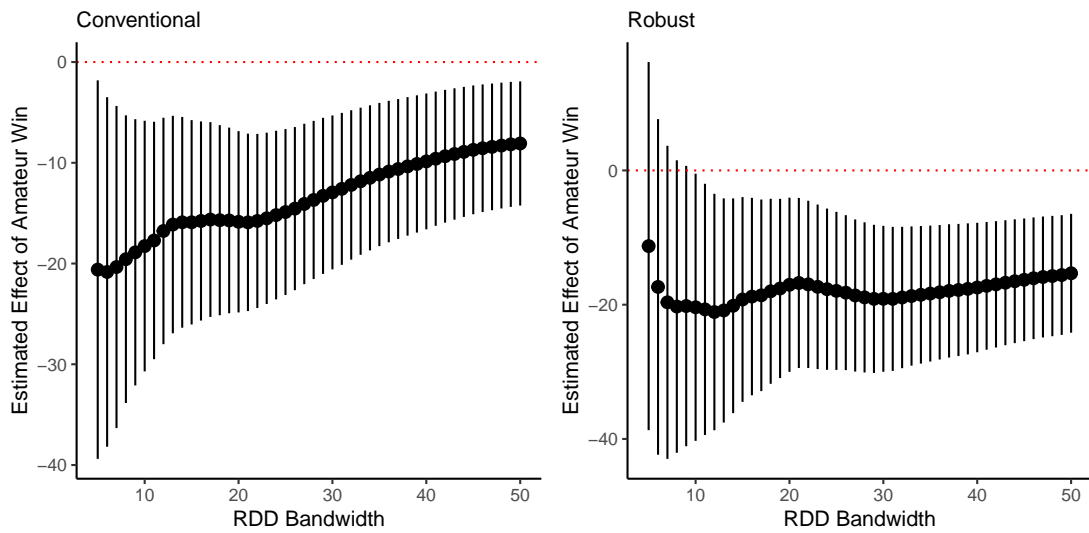
Figure S15: Estimated effect of amateur primary win varying regression discontinuity bandwidth (margin of amateur victory) using a linear estimator and conventional and robust bias-correction adjustments.

S2.6 Rhetoric Classification

Rhetoric data contain Twitter/X posts, floor speeches, newsletters, and public statements. Classification is performed using ChatGPT, with a model having been tuned using multi-shot classification with validation from human coders.[1]
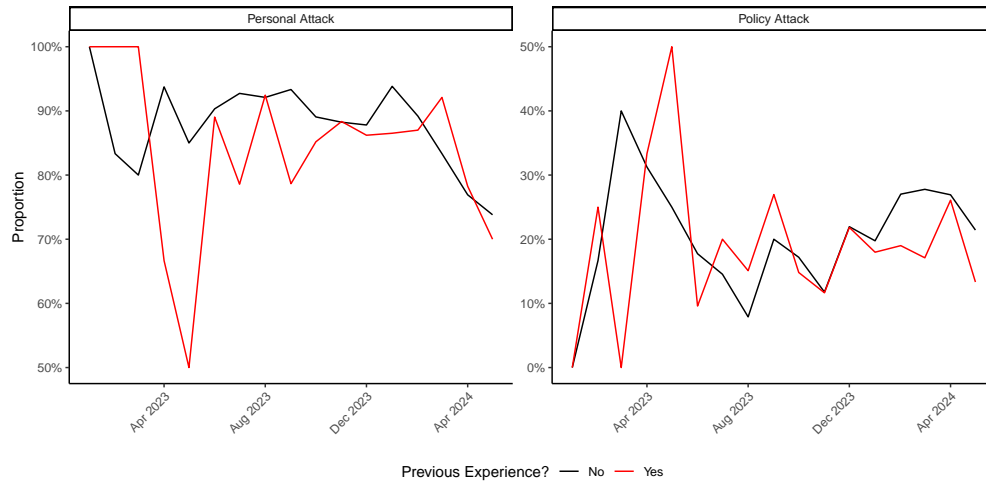

Figure S16: Subclassification frequency of attack types (personal versus policy) for House Representatives, 2023-2024.

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[1]Full details of the prompts used in classification can be found at https://americaspoliticalpulse.com/elites/data.html#classified-communication-data.

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