

Dropout Decisions in U.S. House Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines dropout decisions in congressional elections and explores the implications of dropout patterns for electoral competition. I draw on a new dataset of U.S. House candidates who were voted on in the primary and individuals who initiated a candidacy but were not on the ballot. I find that quality candidates, or those with previous political experience, are more likely to drop out than those without political experience, even when there are no other quality candidates in the race. In addition, dropout rates have increased in recent years as the cost of running for Congress has soared, and quality candidates are also more likely to drop out as the fundraising disparity between them and the general election winner widens. The findings highlight the limits of party efforts to pull candidates into races and push others out and uncover a new way in which the influx of money in American elections diminishes political competition. More generally, the disproportionate exit of quality candidates has important implications for the choices available to voters and the quality of representation.

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

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

Scholars associated with the UCLA School of political parties have recently broadened our view of the nomination process by examining how pre-nomination dynamics influence the eventual makeup of competitors (Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008; Hassell 2018; Masket 2009). However, less attention has been given to how those who drop out differ from those who remain in the race, and perhaps most critically, how the possible makeup of competitors differs from the actual makeup of competitors. In addition, while the central argument of the UCLA School is that groups coordinate around their preferred candidate well before the primary to affect which candidates enter the race, which candidates exit, and which candidates win, it remains unclear how candidates and parties reconcile their differences when their interests conflict. For instance, parties may have a difficult time pushing candidates out of desirable races, and the party's preferred candidate may not want to run for a variety of reasons.

This paper examines candidate entry and exit in congressional elections and explores the implications of dropout decisions for political competition. I draw on a new dataset of U.S. House candidates who were voted on in the primary and individuals who initiated a candidacy but were not on the ballot. I find that quality candidates, or those with previous political experience, are more likely to drop out than those without political experience. Quality candidates are more likely to drop out even when no other quality candidates are in the race and less likely to drop out as the number of other quality candidates in the race increases, which is indicative of the limits of party efforts to pull candidates into races and push others out. In addition, dropout rates have increased in recent years as the cost of running for Congress has soared, and quality candidates are also more likely to drop out as the fundraising disparity between them and the general election winner widens. The focus on dropouts provides new insight into how the influx of money in American elections diminishes political competition.

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

Candidates, Parties, and the Nomination Process

Scholars have rarely traced the trajectory of political candidacies beyond the ballot, but the two main explanations for why individuals run for office can be broadly categorized as candidate-centered or party-centered. The conventional wisdom has long been that the modern era of American campaigns is candidate-centered. Unlike in electoral systems where candidates are agents of the party, most of the burdens of running for office in the U.S. context are borne by the candidate. Individuals will enter a race if they think they have a chance to win and can achieve their goals in office; if not, they will drop out or abstain from the race.¹ In this view,

¹ A long line of research has adopted this view of a candidacy in the U.S. context (see, for example, Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1987; Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Black 1972; Brace 1984; Canon 1993; Fowler 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; Herrnson 2004; Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Kazeem 1994; King 2017; Maestas et al. 2006; Maisel and Stone 2014; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966; Stone and Maisel 2003; Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 2004; Thomsen 2017).

parties and groups have a limited influence on candidate nominations. Indeed, the dominant perspective of political parties in the United States is that they are tools to promote the interests and goals of ambitious politicians (Aldrich 1995). As Herrnson (2004, 35) notes, “[Parties] serve more as vehicles that self-recruited candidates use to advance their careers than as organizations that can make or break those careers.”

There are a few studies that examined a fuller range of competitors beyond the ballot but still fit within the candidate-centered framework. Most are qualitative due to the data challenges associated with identifying these individuals. For example, Fowler and McClure (1989) conducted a case study of the 1984 U.S. House race in New York’s 30th congressional district and interviewed more than 60 leading political players in the district, offering a rare look into how political ambitions change throughout the campaign cycle. Kazee’s (1994) edited volume employed a similar approach that documented the pool of potential and actual contenders in nine U.S. House districts in the 1992 cycle. King’s (2017) recent book provides a detailed analysis of the timing decisions of candidates and non-candidates for the U.S. Senate from 1996 to 2010. His focus is on the decision to enter rather than exit, but he shows that candidate entry is influenced by the actions of other potential and actual candidates across contexts and over time.

Over the past decade, scholars associated with the UCLA School have generated new interest in how political parties influence candidate nominations and they have also extended our view of the nomination process (Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008; Dominguez 2011; Masket 2009; Hassell 2018). One key contribution of the UCLA School has been to push back on the candidate-centered narrative and suggest that party insiders shape the choices on the ballot in ways that have been overlooked. The main argument is that nominees are chosen through an invisible primary where candidates compete for support from the various groups that constitute

the party. Cohen et al. (2008, 109) write that strong parties are “able to say No as well as Yes to candidates who seek the nomination.” In this view, the party coalition is the force behind candidate decisions, and individuals do not run, drop out, or lose because they fail to attract sufficient support from party insiders. In fact, the book most commonly cited within the UCLA School is titled *The Party Decides* (Cohen et al. 2008).

To be sure, a long line of research has highlighted the importance of political parties in fostering political ambition (i.e., Broockman et al. 2013; Maestas et al. 2006; Lawless and Fox 2010; see Broockman 2014 for a rich review). Yet surveys also indicate that party support is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to run. One study of 3,600 potential candidates showed that around 80 percent of those who received a suggestion to run from a political actor did not run (Lawless and Fox 2010, 150). In another study of state legislators, about 50 percent of representatives were actively encouraged to run by the party (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013, 54), but this means that about half were not actively sought out by the party. And what is perhaps more relevant here is much of this research still adopts a candidate-centered framework and is quite distinct from the theory of party involvement put forth by the UCLA School. Simply put, while parties are expected to influence candidate decision making, they are not expected to control the decision to enter and exit in the way the UCLA School posits.

With respect to the decision to drop out in particular, the candidate-centered and party-centered frameworks often have similar observable implications even though the reason for the behavior differs. Candidates may drop out because the professional and personal costs are much greater than expected or because they did not have support from party elites. However, when the interests of parties and candidates diverge, it is unclear how these conflicts are resolved and whose interests prevail. McCarty and Schickler (2018, 181) argue that the career incentives and

risk tolerances of elected officials are likely to differ from those of party elites, with politicians preferring to win elections now rather than promoting the groups' agenda over the long run. The tension between the incentives of candidates and parties is perhaps most acute during the nomination process. Whereas parties want to recruit their preferred candidate or discourage others from running, candidates may have their own goals that conflict with those of the party. Two of these scenarios are considered here.

First, party leaders overwhelmingly turn to their available networks of current and former officeholders to recruit candidates (Carnes 2018; Hassell 2018), but they may find it difficult to attract their preferred candidate. Previous office experience is not a perfect indicator of viability, but it demonstrates an awareness of and familiarity with many of the activities that candidates and legislators perform. However, those with previous political experience have a lot at stake professionally and personally if they run and do not win. They may even be holding elected office, and most officeholders have to leave their current positions to run. In addition, these individuals have likely reached some degree of success in their private lives, and they may incur greater financial losses by putting their careers aside or on hold. While it is in the party's interest to attract experienced candidates, these individuals have their own considerations to weigh. Moreover, the experience of running for office may have worsened in recent years as the costs of campaigning have increased, particularly for those who have alternative career options.

Second, parties may have a difficult time pushing candidates out of desirable races. About 90 percent of incumbents seek reelection, and quality candidates enter when the context is favorable (i.e., Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Individuals who have previous political experience make up more than half of the candidates for open seats but fewer than one-quarter of candidates in races with an incumbent (Jacobson and Carson 2016). Ambitious politicians wait years for a

seat to become open, and most know it will not open up again for a long time. Even if the decision to run crosses party insiders, it may well be worth it. Although more competitors diminish an individual's chance of winning, the entry of quality candidates can also serve as a signal to other quality candidates that the seat is winnable (Canon 1993). Whereas party elites may want to clear the field, ambitious politicians may want to take advantage of an opportunity that rarely comes around. Individuals may have a better chance of winning in the same kinds of races where party elites are expected to coordinate behind one candidate and push out others.

The competing incentives of candidates and parties have different implications for the decision to drop out or remain in the race. First, quality candidates should be less likely to drop out if party elites use the resources at their disposal to pull them into the race. Parties have strong motivation to recruit quality candidates, and this should be especially true when there are no other experienced candidates in the race. Quality candidates, however, have a lot on the line if they run and do not win. One caveat is that higher dropout rates among quality candidates could be consistent with a party-centered model if party elites intervene to push candidates out when there are multiple quality candidates in the race in order to avoid a divisive primary (Hassell 2018). Thus, in races with at least one quality candidate in the race, quality candidates may be more likely to drop out as the number of other quality candidates increases if party elites seek to clear the field for a single preferred candidate. A candidate-centered model would instead posit that quality candidates should be less likely to drop out as the number of other quality candidates increases if quality candidates are a signal that the race is winnable.

The implications extend beyond the party-centered and candidate-centered models as well. The makeup of dropouts provides insight into how competition *almost* looked, which differs from other studies of underrepresented groups or representational inequalities that

consider why some potentially good candidates have not considered running or do not run (i.e., Lawless and Fox 2010; Carnes 2018). Furthermore, many dropouts actively participate in the election, and they influence the choices of other candidates and the dynamics of the race (Fowler and McClure 1989; Kazee 1994; King 2017). Systematic differences in candidate dropout decisions matter for the overall makeup and quality of electoral competition. If experienced candidates are more likely to drop out, the level of competition is likely to suffer as a result. Scholars have long bemoaned the decline in competition in congressional elections, and dropouts offer a window into how electoral outcomes might have been different. The broader race-level consequences of individual-level dropout decisions are examined in the final section.

Data

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

² Another option was to look at those who filed paperwork to run within their respective states, but this was less desirable for several reasons. First, most states do not keep historical records of the candidates who filed to run for office. Second, filing records are stored at the county level in some cases and at the state level in others. New York, for example, retains their records for two years after the election, and New Yorkers who file to run in congressional districts that fall within a single county do so at the county level while those in districts that cross county borders file at the state level. Third, differences in filing deadlines across states means that the pool of filers in states with earlier deadlines is likely to be larger and more reflective of the pool of FEC filers than the pool of filers in states with later deadlines as some may have decided to exit the race by that point. The pool of FEC filers thus provides the best opportunity to examine this pool of individuals more systematically across states and over time.

competitors that the individual not only intends to run but also intends to be a viable candidate.³ This measure thus captures some of the more serious contenders who competed in what scholars have called the invisible primary, or the action between candidates and party insiders before the primary election. It excludes other individuals who initiated a candidacy in another way but did not appear on the ballot, but the increasing importance of money in campaigns makes fundraising an appropriate starting point.

I draw on two datasets to generate the dropouts and on-ballot candidates. First, I use Bonica's (2014) data to identify the candidates who filed with the Federal Election Commission and raised money.⁴ Second, I collected the full sample of on-ballot primary candidates from 1980 to 2016 from the America Votes series and the FEC website and added the Bonica identifier to each candidate. There are 27,978 on-ballot candidates, 20,398 of which are non-incumbents, and the dataset includes regular and special elections. The dropouts are simply those who are in the FEC filers dataset but not the on-ballot candidate dataset.⁵ Data on the previous political experience of the dropouts was obtained from Newsbank and online searches. Pettigrew et al. (2014), Hassell (2018), and Porter and Treul (2018) generously provided or made publicly available measures of the political backgrounds of on-ballot candidates from 2000 to 2010, from

³ Candidates who raise more than \$5,000 are required to file with the FEC, and this law has been in place since 1979. Not all who file meet the threshold, but the act of filing conveys an intention to do so. The FEC filers who raise no money and drop out are excluded as they are unlikely to be perceived as credible threats. In fact, it is unclear whether party elites and other candidates are even aware of their existence.

⁴ The analysis is limited to Republicans and Democrats. Also, I used FEC data to generate the filers in 2016 rather than Bonica's data due to data availability when the data were collected.

⁵ Incumbent members of Congress who filed with the FEC but retired before the primary are not considered dropouts. Retirement is conceptually different from non-incumbents who decide not to run. The number of dropouts is larger than Hassell's (2018) dataset of dropouts as his dataset is limited to candidates who received support from party donors in at least two quarters.

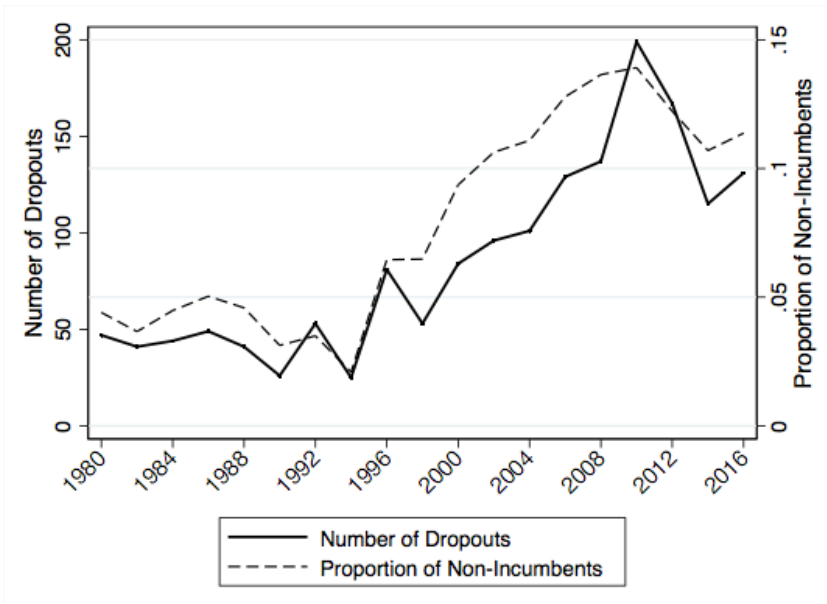
2004 to 2014, and from 1980 to 1988, respectively.⁶ All of these datasets followed Jacobson's (1989) measure of quality, which is whether the individual held previous elected office.

The size of dropouts as a category varies depending on how dropouts are measured. The measurement here of those who filed with the FEC and raised money but were not on the ballot results in a total of 1,619 dropouts from 1980 to 2016, which is 7.9 percent of the number of non-incumbents.⁷ However, the number of dropouts has varied significantly during this time period. Changes in the number of dropouts and dropouts as a proportion of non-incumbents are shown in Figure 1. The number of dropouts has ranged from a low of 25 in 1994 to a high of 199 in 2010, and dropouts as a proportion of non-incumbents has ranged from 2.1 percent in 1994 to 13.9 percent in 2010. Yet it is clear that the trend is increasing over time, which provides additional motivation for why we might want to look at these individuals more closely. Of course, these figures would be higher if we included those who considered running but did not take this costly step of raising money, but the appeal of focusing on these individuals is they have an ability to shape the dynamics of the race in ways that most potential candidates do not.

⁶ I am currently collecting quality data for on-ballot candidates in the 1990s. Thus, the analyses with quality measures include the 1980-1988 and 2000-2014 election cycles.

⁷ Of these, 503 are in open seats and 1,116 are in districts with an incumbent. In the 1,116 districts with an incumbent, 291 are same-party incumbents and 825 are opposite-party incumbents.

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

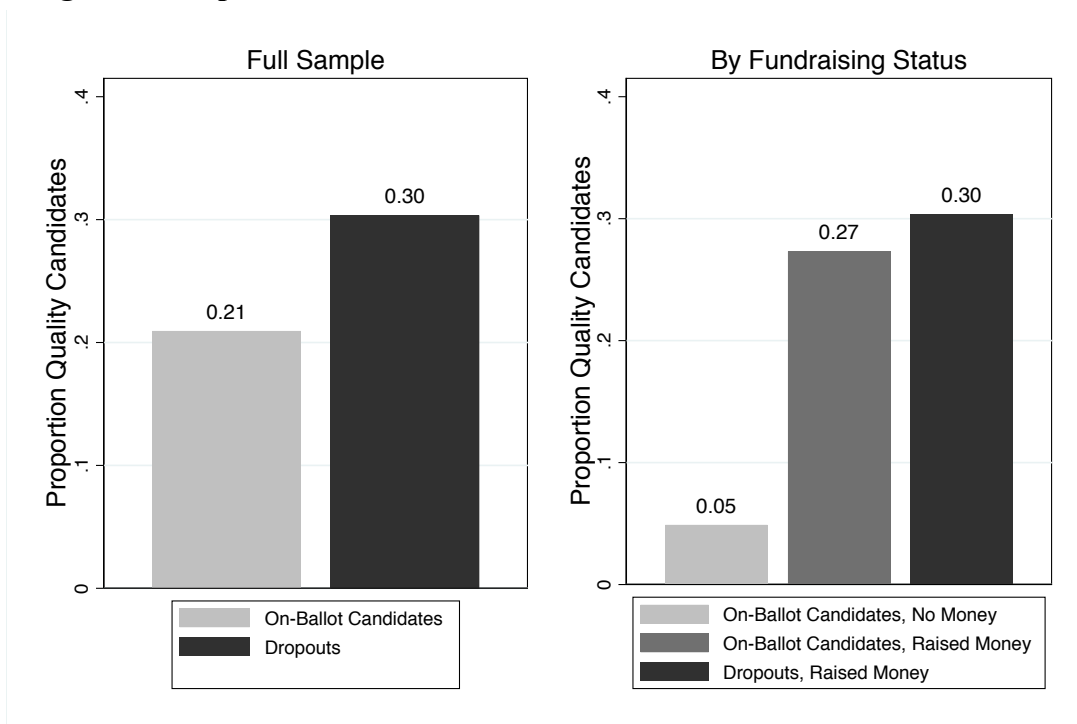


Source: Dropouts are those who filed with the FEC and raised money but were not on the ballot (Bonica 2014). On-ballot candidates were collected from the America Votes series and the FEC.

We are also interested in whether dropouts differ from on-ballot candidates on key dimensions that matter for election outcomes and legislative representation. The first question is whether there are differences in the previous political experience of dropouts and on-ballot candidates. The comparison of dropouts with all on-ballot candidates is shown in the left panel of Figure 2, and the comparison of dropouts with all on-ballot candidates who raised money is shown in the right panel. We can see that dropouts are more likely to have previous political experience than on-ballot candidates. In the full sample, 30 percent of dropouts have held previous elected office, compared to 21 percent of non-incumbent on-ballot candidates ($p < 0.01$). Among those who raised money, the gap is smaller but dropouts are still more likely to have held previous elected office ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, the dropout rate for quality non-incumbent candidates is higher than that for non-quality candidates. In the full sample, 12 percent of quality

candidates dropped out, on average, compared to 8 percent of non-quality candidates ($p < 0.01$).⁸ Though not shown here, I also looked at whether this pattern differs by seat type. Quality candidates are more likely to drop out both in open seats and when they run as challengers. The overall proportion of quality candidates is higher in open seats, which conforms to previous research, but the quality difference is evident across seat type.

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



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

The next section further examines the relationship between candidate quality and the decision to drop out. The dependent variable is whether the individual initiated a candidacy but

⁸ If we restrict the analysis to those who raised money, the gap narrows to 13 percent and 11 percent, respectively, but is still statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

withdrew before the primary or was on the ballot. The main independent variable is whether the individual held previous elected office. Quality candidates should be less likely to drop out if the party is able to steer resources to its preferred candidate but more likely to do so if they have a lot at stake if they run and do not win, particularly in recent years as campaigning demands have increased. One caveat discussed above is that quality candidates may be more likely to drop out as the number of other quality candidates increases if party elites seek to clear the field for a single preferred candidate. Alternatively, if quality candidates use the entry of quality candidates as a signal of how favorable the context is, they should be less likely to drop out as the number of quality candidates increases. I examine these possibilities by interacting quality candidate with the number of other quality candidates in the race.

The analyses are limited to primaries with no same-party incumbent because we would expect that parties want to recruit quality candidates where there is no same-party incumbent and that quality candidates rarely want to challenge an incumbent in a primary.⁹ Each analysis is broken down by district type, with favorable districts measured as those with more than 55 percent of the same-party presidential vote, competitive districts as those between 45 and 55 percent, and unfavorable districts as those with less than 45 percent of the same-party presidential vote. We might expect parties to be most active in candidate recruitment in competitive districts so they can avoid a divisive primary and conserve their resources for the general election (Hassell 2018). I also analyze these relationships over time to see if dropout patterns differ between the 1980s and the 2000s in light of the increased financial costs and demands of campaigning in more recent elections.

⁹ However, the results remain the same when all non-incumbents are included in the models.

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

The Decision to Drop Out

This section examines the relationship between candidate quality and the decision to drop out. The results are presented in Table 1. The full sample is shown in Column 1. The model in Column 2 includes Bonica's CFscores, with higher values corresponding to moderate ideology. In Columns 3-5, the sample is broken down by district partisanship. Across models, quality candidates are more likely to drop out than those without previous political experience. The coefficients do not differ much by district type, which is likely a reflection of the fact that these individuals have already taken initial steps to launch a candidacy. For quality candidates, the predicted probability of dropping out of a House race is more than double what it is for those without previous political experience, all else equal (7.9 and 3.7 percent, respectively).

Table 1: Quality Candidates Are More Likely to Drop Out Than Non-Quality Candidates, Across District Type

	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) Competitive	(4) Favorable	(5) Unfavorable
Quality Candidate	0.80** (0.09)	0.62** (0.09)	0.89** (0.14)	0.84** (0.16)	0.67** (0.15)
Number of Primary Candidates	0.29** (0.06)	0.31** (0.07)	0.14 (0.14)	0.04 (0.09)	0.72** (0.15)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.07** (0.02)
Open Seat	-0.03 (0.11)	-0.10 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.19)	0.30 (0.23)	0.24 (0.15)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.64** (0.06)	0.54** (0.07)	0.40** (0.11)	0.84** (0.14)	0.65** (0.10)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.04* (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.03** (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)	0.06** (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	0.06** (0.01)
Share of District Receipts	-0.11** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.12** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.02)	-0.07** (0.01)
Number of Times Run	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.15* (0.08)	-0.34* (0.15)	-0.04 (0.06)
Female	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.17)	-0.15 (0.22)	-0.14 (0.17)
Republican	-0.18* (0.08)	-0.20* (0.09)	-0.22 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.19)	-0.01 (0.13)
Moderate	—	0.19** (0.06)	—	—	—
Constant	-5.00** (0.32)	-3.78** (0.38)	-6.16** (1.29)	-3.16** (1.03)	-7.11** (0.59)
Observations	11,820	8,217	3,156	3,055	5,609
Log-Likelihood	-2960.35	-2076.88	-905.93	-724.47	-1249.09

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

These patterns do not seem to conform to a party-centered model where the party picks its preferred candidate to run, but we also want to analyze the likelihood of dropping out for quality candidates when no other quality candidates are in the race. Quality candidates should be especially likely to have the backing of the party in these contexts. The results are shown in Table 2. As above, quality candidates are more likely to drop out than non-quality candidates even when there are no other quality candidates in the race. Furthermore, quality candidates are more likely to drop out in competitive and unfavorable districts where they would almost certainly have party support. The coefficient is positive in favorable partisan districts, but the relationship is not significant. In none of the models are quality candidates less likely to drop out even when no other quality candidates are in the race. While the party has a preference to field a quality candidate, these individuals have a lot at stake if they run and do not win.

We are also interested in dropout decisions in races where there is at least one other quality candidate. If quality candidates use the entry of quality candidates as a signal of how favorable the context is, they may be less likely to drop out as the number of quality candidates increases. However, if the entry of multiple quality candidates is a coordination problem that party elites resolve by persuading candidates to drop out, quality candidates may be more likely to exit the race as the number of other quality candidates increases. The results are presented in Table 3. In races with at least one quality candidate, quality candidates are less, not more, likely to drop out as the number of other quality candidates in the race increases. The coefficient is significant in unfavorable districts, but it does not reach conventional levels of significance in competitive or favorable districts. In none of the models are quality candidates more likely to drop out as the number of quality candidates increases as the party-centered model would suggest.

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

	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) Competitive	(4) Favorable	(5) Unfavorable
Quality Candidate	0.56** (0.15)	0.51** (0.15)	0.47† (0.25)	0.32 (0.44)	0.68** (0.21)
Number of Primary Candidates	1.04** (0.22)	1.06** (0.27)	1.16** (0.32)	1.98** (0.44)	0.79* (0.33)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.13** (0.03)	-0.13** (0.04)	-0.15** (0.05)	-0.25** (0.05)	-0.09† (0.05)
Open Seat	0.15 (0.16)	-0.07 (0.17)	-0.08 (0.32)	0.75* (0.37)	0.13 (0.23)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.63** (0.09)	0.52** (0.10)	0.50** (0.18)	0.73* (0.29)	0.63** (0.13)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.03† (0.01)	-0.01 (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.03** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.03† (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	0.04* (0.02)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.04** (0.00)	0.03** (0.01)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.05** (0.01)
Share of District Receipts	-0.09** (0.01)	-0.13** (0.01)	-0.10** (0.01)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.01)
Number of Times Run	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.07)	-0.28* (0.11)	-0.40 (0.36)	0.01 (0.07)
Female	0.06 (0.15)	0.09 (0.16)	-0.03 (0.25)	0.11 (0.60)	0.04 (0.20)
Republican	-0.01 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.12)	0.06 (0.19)	-0.24 (0.44)	-0.00 (0.17)
Moderate	—	0.17† (0.09)	—	—	—
Constant	-7.00** (0.54)	-5.11** (0.63)	-7.41** (2.01)	-5.57** (2.05)	-7.22** (0.78)
Observations	7,539	5,129	1,865	1,130	4,534
Log-Likelihood	-1462.00	-1006.08	-418.09	-175.65	-841.53

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

Table 3: Quality Candidates are Less Likely to Drop Out as the Number of Other Quality Candidates Increases

	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) Competitive	(4) Favorable	(5) Unfavorable
Quality Candidate	1.28** (0.21)	0.89** (0.23)	1.69** (0.46)	1.27** (0.36)	1.42** (0.47)
Number of Other Quality Candidates	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.14† (0.08)	-0.02 (0.16)	-0.09 (0.09)	0.48* (0.21)
Quality Candidate x Number of Other Quality Candidates	-0.18* (0.08)	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.35 (0.25)	-0.11 (0.11)	-0.61* (0.28)
Open Seat	-0.27* (0.13)	-0.23 (0.15)	-0.45* (0.22)	-0.11 (0.26)	-0.17 (0.25)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.66** (0.09)	0.55** (0.09)	0.41** (0.14)	0.90** (0.17)	0.53** (0.15)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Number of State Legislators	0.02† (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.06† (0.03)	0.00 (0.01)	0.08** (0.02)
Share of District Receipts	-0.12** (0.01)	-0.17** (0.02)	-0.14** (0.02)	-0.16** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)
Number of Times Run	-0.15* (0.07)	-0.10 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.12)	-0.30† (0.16)	-0.19 (0.12)
Female	-0.19 (0.14)	-0.33† (0.17)	-0.06 (0.23)	-0.23 (0.25)	-0.59† (0.33)
Republican	-0.28* (0.12)	-0.30* (0.14)	-0.52** (0.20)	-0.18 (0.23)	0.01 (0.24)
Moderate	—	0.20** (0.07)	—	—	—
Constant	-3.08** (0.49)	-2.22** (0.56)	-5.51*** (1.74)	-3.39* (1.36)	-6.30** (1.23)
Observations	4,281	3,088	1,291	1,915	1,075
Log-Likelihood	-1407.48	-1002.49	-456.28	-520.33	-378.14

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

With respect to the controls, the likelihood of dropping out generally increases when there are more candidates in the primary. Preprimary endorsement rules are also associated with higher dropout rates, which is consistent with previous research.¹⁰ The number of state legislators and the number of congressional seats in a state are related to dropout decisions in most of the models. Experience as a candidate decreases the likelihood of dropping out, and individuals who raise a larger share of district receipts are less likely to drop out as well. The probability of dropping out is higher in favorable partisan districts where competition is likely to be greater (Stone and Maisel 2003). In the models with ideology, moderates are more likely to drop out than those at the extremes, but this relationship is only significant in recent years (see Table 4). Given that moderates are less likely to run than ideologues in the first place, it may be an especially uphill battle to elect centrists to Congress today (Thomsen 2014, 2017).

Campaign Finance and Quality Dropouts

The increase in dropouts since the 1980s noted above suggests that something about the electoral context has changed in recent years, and we can leverage these over-time differences to better understand why quality candidates are dropping out. In Table 4, the sample is split into two periods—1980-1988 and 2000-2014—to first examine general differences in dropout patterns during this time. We can see that quality candidates are more likely to drop out than non-quality candidates in both samples, but the coefficient is much larger in the 2000s. In addition, when ideology is included in the 1980s model, quality candidate is no longer statistically significant. The probability of dropping out for non-quality candidates increases from 2.1 percent in the 1980s to 5.5 percent in the 2000s. By comparison, the likelihood of

¹⁰ I also interacted quality candidate and preprimary endorsement rules, and the interaction term is insignificant across models.

dropping out for quality candidates increases by more than three and a half times from the 1980s to the 2000s, from 3.1 percent to 12.4 percent.

Table 4: Relationship between Candidate Quality and Dropping Out, Over Time

	1980-1988		2000-2014	
	(1) All	(2) Ideology	(3) All	(4) Ideology
Quality Candidate	0.40† (0.22)	0.05 (0.26)	0.89** (0.10)	0.71** (0.10)
Number of Primary Candidates	0.42* (0.18)	0.37** (0.13)	0.27** (0.06)	0.32** (0.07)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.03† (0.02)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)
Open Seat	0.11 (0.23)	-0.08 (0.27)	-0.09 (0.12)	-0.11 (0.13)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.87** (0.14)	0.70** (0.17)	0.61** (0.07)	0.52** (0.07)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	-0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.02** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.03** (0.00)	0.03** (0.00)
Share of District Receipts	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.17** (0.03)	-0.12** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)
Number of Times Run	-0.86** (0.29)	-0.72* (0.32)	-0.08† (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)
Female	-0.14 (0.27)	-0.13 (0.37)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.12 (0.12)
Republican	-0.02 (0.19)	0.11 (0.26)	-0.17* (0.09)	-0.20* (0.10)
Moderate	—	0.20 (0.17)	—	0.19** (0.06)
Constant	-3.97** (0.60)	-2.59** (0.73)	-4.15** (0.29)	-3.25** (0.32)
Observations	4,191	2,435	7,629	5,782
Log-Likelihood	-639.78	-332.38	-2300.83	-1731.84

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

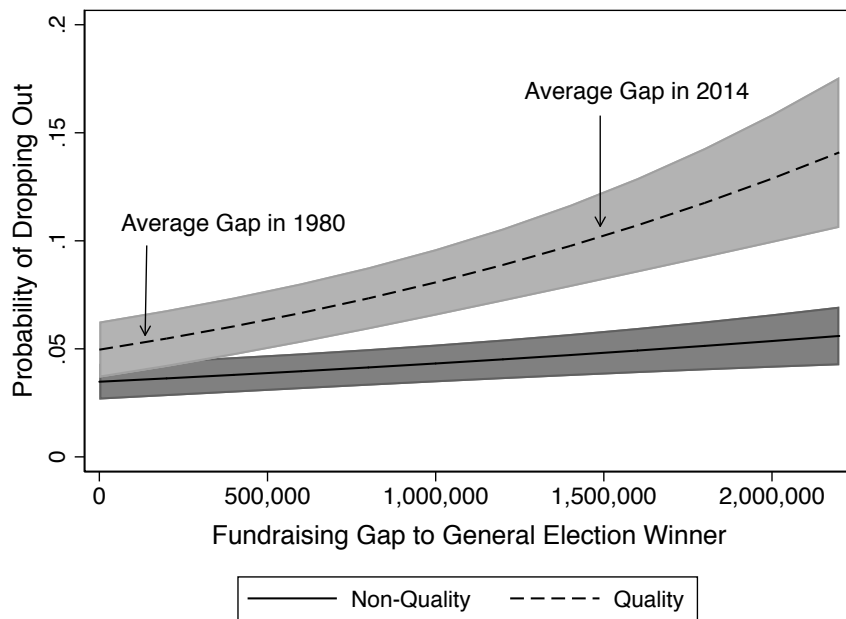
The rise of money in American elections is one of the most noteworthy changes to occur during this time period. The total amount of money in congressional elections increased more than 600 percent from 1980 to 2012, from \$372.5 million to \$2.6 billion (Albert 2017, 2). The cost of winning a House election more than tripled from about \$500,000 in 1980 to nearly \$1,700,000 in 2012 (Albert 2017, 11; CFI 2016). The demands to raise early money during the preprimary season have increased as well. Candidates need to raise far more early money today to remain viable than they did in the 1980s. As the disparity between what candidates have raised and what they will likely need to win increases, they may be more likely to exit the race. Quality candidates may be especially likely to do so because they have ample alternative career options. This may be one reason we see the dropout patterns above among quality candidates today.

The remainder of this section explores whether quality candidates are more likely to drop out as the fundraising disparity between them and the general election winner increases. The average disparity between the receipts of non-incumbents and general election winners is \$834,000 during this period, but it increased from \$153,000 in 1980 to \$1,463,000 in 2014. Among non-incumbents in 1980, the average disparity was \$127,000 and \$191,000 for quality on-ballot candidates and quality dropouts, respectively. Among non-incumbents in 2014, the average disparity was \$1,073,000 and \$2,301,000 for quality on-ballot candidates and quality dropouts, respectively. This is a daunting amount of money to raise, even for those who are plugged into donor networks. The same electoral and institution variables are included in these models. I also use the total receipts raised rather than their share of district receipts here to

account for the overall increase in fundraising in addition to the disparity measure.¹¹ The models are again restricted to primaries with no same-party incumbent in the race.

The results are presented in Table 5, for the full sample and by time period. Quality candidates are more likely to drop out as the fundraising disparity with the general election winner increases, but the interaction term is not significant in the 1980s model. The predicted probability of dropping out across a range of fundraising gaps is shown in Figure 3. A shift from the average fundraising disparity for quality candidates in 1980 to that for quality candidates in 2014 doubles the likelihood of dropping out (from about 5 to 10 percent).

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Dropping Out Across Fundraising Gaps, for Quality and Non-Quality Candidates



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

¹¹ These variables are correlated at -0.21. Negative values of the disparity measure indicate that the candidate raised more than the general election winner; positive values indicate that the general election candidate raised more than the candidate.

Table 5: Quality Candidates Are More Likely to Drop Out as the Fundraising Gap to Victory Widens

	(1) All	(2) 1980-1988	(3) 2000-2014
Quality Candidate	0.37* (0.15)	0.05 (0.40)	0.51** (0.19)
Fundraising Gap to Winner	0.23** (0.06)	0.89* (0.40)	0.23** (0.07)
Quality Candidate x Fundraising Gap	0.29** (0.09)	1.01 (0.82)	0.23* (0.11)
Number of Primary Candidates	0.35** (0.06)	0.54** (0.14)	0.30** (0.06)
Primary Candidates Squared	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)
Open Seat	0.07 (0.11)	0.16 (0.23)	0.04 (0.13)
Preprimary Endorsements	0.64** (0.06)	0.89** (0.15)	0.60** (0.07)
Number of Congressional Seats	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.00)
Number of State Legislators	0.03** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.03** (0.01)
Same-Party Presidential Vote Share	0.02** (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)	0.03** (0.00)
Total Receipts (\$10,000s)	-0.04** (0.00)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.03** (0.00)
Number of Times Run	-0.10* (0.05)	-0.84** (0.30)	-0.06 (0.05)
Female	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.13 (0.27)	-0.11 (0.12)
Republican	-0.17* (0.08)	0.04 (0.19)	-0.17† (0.09)
Constant	-5.61** (0.32)	-4.54** (0.60)	-4.66** (0.30)
Observations	11,773	4,182	7,591
Log-Likelihood	-2941.03	-635.49	-2270.95

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

**p<0.01, *p<0.05, †p<0.10.

Although party-affiliated donors steer money to candidates (Hassell 2018), it is also the case that the cost of winning a House seat has increased enormously over time. Candidates need to raise far more money today than they did in the 1980s to be equally competitive. While the

average gap between non-incumbents and general election winners was still sizeable in the 1980s, it has continued to widen in almost every election since then. Needing to raise an additional \$1,000,000 is far more discouraging than needing to raise an additional \$100,000. The fact that quality candidates are more likely to bow out than non-quality candidates as this financial disparity to victory increases also suggests that parties are limited in their ability to direct resources to potentially viable candidates.¹²

Implications for Electoral Competition

Our final concern is how these dropout decisions add up and affect the choices on the ballot and partisan victory patterns. The aim is to put these individual-level dropout decisions in a broader electoral context and consider their implications for candidate selection and political competition. Three main questions are briefly addressed here. First, how prevalent are dropouts in American elections, and how do patterns of competition differ when dropouts are included in our measures? Second and perhaps most importantly, what is the ultimate makeup of primary competitors in races where would-be quality candidates drop out? How often are there other candidates on the ballot with previous political experience, and how often are there no quality candidates on the ballot? And finally, how might these dropout decisions matter for a political party's chance of winning the general election?

During the time period here, there are 5,769 elections at the congressional district level.¹³ There is a dropout in 923, or 16 percent, of these elections. Dropouts are more common in open seats than in districts with an incumbent (40 percent of open seats and 13 percent of districts with

¹² Again, this relationship is apparent even in primaries with zero other quality candidates.

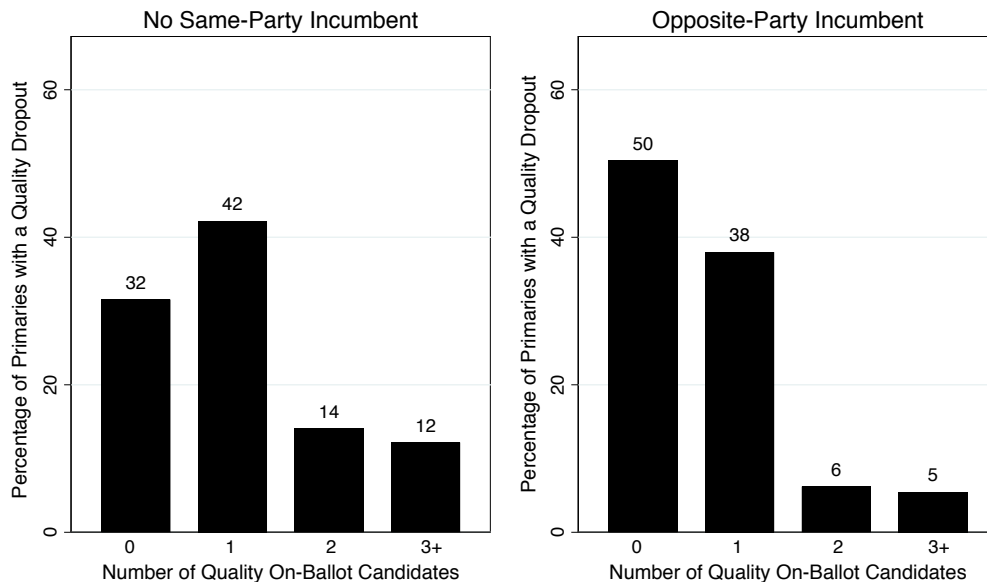
¹³ Of the 5,769 elections, 5,655 are regular elections and 114 are special elections.

an incumbent had a dropout). At the primary level, there is a dropout in 1,002 of the 10,791 primary elections (9 percent), but dropouts are more common in primaries without an incumbent (15 percent).¹⁴ In primaries without an incumbent, the average number of candidates increases from 2.17 to 2.36 when dropouts are included. In open seats, the average number of candidates increases from 3.74 to 4.10 and the average number of quality candidates increases from 1.22 to 1.37 when dropouts are included. If we consider the proportion of quality candidates to on-ballot candidates, the proportion of quality candidates increases from 0.19 to 0.22 in primaries without an incumbent and from 0.37 to 0.43 in open seats when dropouts are included in our measures.

Electoral competition thus looks better in some ways when dropouts are considered. Yet at the same time, these individuals are not presented as choices to voters. We might be especially concerned about the ultimate makeup of primary competitors in races where quality candidates dropped out. Figure 4 shows the number of quality candidates on the ballot in primaries with at least one quality dropout. The left panel includes races with no same-party incumbent (opposite-party incumbents and open seats), and the right panel includes races with an opposite-party incumbent (excludes open seats). In nearly one-third of primaries with a quality dropout and no same-party incumbent, there were zero quality candidates on the ballot. The percentage of primaries with no quality candidate on the ballot but at least one quality dropout increases to 50 percent when we look at races with an opposite-party incumbent. In terms of numbers, this amounts to 83 and 65 primary races, respectively, that had no quality candidates on the ballot and at least one quality dropout.

¹⁴ Of the 1,002 primaries with a dropout, 330 have a quality dropout and 672 do not. The models above analyzed only primaries with no same-party incumbent.

Figure 4: Distribution of Quality On-Ballot Candidates in Races with a Quality Dropout



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

These ballot-level patterns also do not seem to provide overwhelming support for the party-centered model, though the UCLA School has given less attention to how the theoretical expectations map onto the choices on the ballot. It seems like the most optimal primary ballot for party elites would include one preferred candidate; the next-best ballot would include multiple candidates who are or could be preferred by the party; and the worst ballot would include zero party-preferred candidates. In the left panel of Figure 4, we see that in 42 percent of races with a quality dropout and no same-party incumbent, there is one quality candidate in the race, which conforms to the argument that party elites recruit current and former officeholders and clear the field for this candidate. However, in 58 percent of these contests, there is either no quality candidate or more than one quality candidate in the race. The right panel shows that in races with

an opposite-party incumbent and at least one quality dropout, 38 percent of primaries have one quality candidate on the ballot but more than 60 percent have zero or two or more.

It is impossible to know whether electoral outcomes would have been different had these individuals remained in the race, but we may want to think about how these dropout decisions might affect a party's chance of winning the general election. The party of the quality dropout won the general election in just 14 percent of races where there was no quality candidate on the ballot, but the party of the quality on-ballot candidate won in 28 percent of races in which there was a single quality candidate on the ballot. In open seat contests, the party of the quality dropout won the general election in 38 percent of races where there was no quality candidate on the ballot, but the party of the quality on-ballot candidate won in 60 percent of races in which there was one quality candidate on the ballot. Of course, there are other dynamics at work, but it seems as if political parties could improve their chances of winning the general election by convincing candidates with previous political experience to remain in the race.

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

Conclusion

This paper began by advocating for a broader conception of a political candidacy that extends beyond the ballot. The main reason is that those who are not on the ballot may still influence patterns of electoral contestation. If competition is related to the number of candidates vying for the electorate's support, then by definition competition would be considered better if more individuals were included in our measures. Yet the characteristics of candidates matter even more for campaigns and election outcomes, and systematic differences in the attributes of dropouts and on-ballot candidates have consequences for the choices available to voters and the quality of representation. The main finding here—that quality candidates are more likely to drop out than those without previous political experience—suggests that these choices could be better and nearly were. Moreover, the increase in the number of dropouts over time and the disparity in dropout rates between quality and non-quality candidates in the 2000s highlight the growing relevance of dropouts as a category in congressional elections.

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

patterns with the argument that parties use the tools and resources at their disposal to recruit their candidate of choice and push other candidates out to clear the field.

Scholars associated with the UCLA School highlight a more constant role for party insiders in the nomination process throughout American history, at least at the presidential level. However, the fact that dropout rates have increased over time suggests that candidate exit is tied to broader changes in the electoral context. The rise in money in congressional elections is one of the most profound electoral changes to occur over the past four decades. Candidates and officeholders frequently bemoan the amount of time they spend on fundraising, and it is no secret that raising money is perhaps the single worst part of running for office yet also among the most critical for those who want to win. In addition, the increase in dropout rates as the costs of campaigns have skyrocketed, particularly among those with previous political experience, suggests that political parties and party-affiliated donors are limited in their ability to steer resources toward candidates to persuade them to stay in the race, even candidates who would likely be their best shot at winning the general election.

More generally, this paper is part of a broader project about how to think about candidates and competition in elections. Given the key role of elections in representative democracies, scholars of candidate emergence and congressional elections should more fully consider the question of who counts as a candidate and what counts as political competition. The findings presented here suggest that, on the one hand, competition in contemporary elections may be better than previous research suggests. We uncovered new competitors that were previously hidden from view and excluded from analyses of congressional elections, and these hidden competitors have more political experience than those who compete through Election Day. Yet as noted above, this also means that the choices on the ballot are not as good as they

nearly were. We know very little about the pool of individuals who were almost, but not quite, competitors in congressional elections. The goal of this project is to learn more about these individuals and to better understand their influence on contemporary American politics.

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