

# Inexperience or Anti-Washington? Voter Preferences for Congressional Candidates

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## Abstract

Do Americans prefer politically inexperienced candidates? Traditionally, candidates who previously held public office receive a boost in vote share in primary and general elections. However, today inexperience in elective office does not seem to disqualify candidates for federal office. In fact, in 2018, 57 seats in Congress were won by candidates with no prior experience in elected office. Moreover, inexperienced candidates frequently tout their lack of experience, citing it as a *positive* attribute that indicates an ability to bring change to an unpopular institution. To determine the extent of citizen demand for inexperience, we field a nationally representative survey to elicit respondent opinions on Congressional candidates' qualifications. We ask respondents to evaluate a candidate whose prior experience is experimentally manipulated. We further manipulate the candidate's use of anti-establishment rhetoric to distinguish demand for inexperience from demand for political change. Building on our understanding of why inexperienced candidates for higher office emerge, the results can help explain why those candidates win.

Recent elections suggest the American electorate is increasingly infatuated with inexperienced candidates for political office. President Trump capitalized on this desire for someone from outside the Beltway, running his presidential campaign in part on the mantra “Washington needs an outsider.” Voters seem increasingly convinced that fixing what ails government is to elect people with no experience in government. In the last two congressional elections, nearly fifty percent of the winning candidates in primaries without incumbents were those without any prior experience in elected office. In 2018, 57 seats in Congress were won by candidates with no prior experience in elected office. This is a dramatic increase from years prior. Although inexperienced candidates are performing better today than they had in previous elections, it is unclear whether the results of elections—the electing of inexperienced candidates—is the actual preference of voters, or if inexperience happens to be the observable outcome. Perhaps voters casting ballots for outsiders are really looking for someone to “shake up Washington” regardless of their experience.

Political scientists have explained the election of inexperienced candidates with supply-side variables, such as candidate ambition and established name recognition, but typically do not consider the demand side of the equation. To determine the extent of citizen demand for inexperience, we field a nationally representative survey asking respondents to evaluate a candidate whose prior experience is experimentally manipulated. We also manipulate the candidate’s use of anti-establishment rhetoric to distinguish demand for inexperience from demand for political change. We find evidence of partisan and ideological differences in respondents’ expressed preferences for prior officeholding experience, with Democrats valuing experience more and conservatives valuing it less. However, when

we experimentally manipulate experience and demand for political change, we find little evidence that respondents prefer inexperienced candidates to experienced candidates. Nor do they support the opposite conclusion, that experienced candidates are preferred. The findings do, however, lend credence to the hypothesis that the American voter responds more warmly to candidates utilizing anti-establishment rhetoric.

## **Candidate Experience in Congressional Elections**

Experience in prior elected office is one of the best predictors of candidate success in congressional elections (Jacobson, 1989). Historically, these “quality” candidates defeat those without experience by wide margins. This finding is best reflected in the voluminous literature on the incumbency advantage, where the incumbent reelection success rate in the U.S. House exceeded 90% in all but the year 2010, when the reelection rate was 85% (Erikson, 1971; Mayhew, 1974; Ansolabehere et al., 2000; Cox and Katz, 1996; Carson et al., 2007).

Exactly what makes experienced candidates higher quality has been the subject of some debate. Experienced officeholders have a track record of winning at least one campaign. Part of their advantage might come from skills necessary for campaigning, like fundraising or public speaking (Squire, 1992). Experienced officeholders might also have qualities that make them better public servants, like personal integrity or competence on the job (Mondak, 1995). In fact, voters tend to reward officeholders with this latter type of personal quality at the ballot box (Buttice and Stone, 2012). However, having prior experience does not necessarily mean a candidate performs well either on the campaign trail or in office.

Although relatively rare, when an incumbent loses an election to an inexperienced candidate it is sure to grab headlines. Famous examples of this include George Nethercutt (R-WA) defeating Speaker of the House Tom Foley (D-WA) in 1994 and Dave Brat (R-VA) defeating Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) in the district's 2014 Republican primary.<sup>1</sup> Despite these examples of high-profile incumbents losing to political neophytes, the most interesting races to assess the success of inexperienced candidates are races without an incumbent. Since these races require that someone other than an incumbent wins, they are often among the most competitive. Experienced challengers emerge in these races strategically (Jacobson and Kernell, 1983; Robeck, 1982; Kazee, 1994; Maisel et al., 1994; Maestas and Rugeley, 2008), which means that when an inexperienced candidate wins the election it was not due to lack of serious competition.

However, inexperienced candidates (sometimes referred to as novices, newcomers, or amateurs) are experiencing a surge in electoral success in the United States; the 2016 and 2018 elections produced a sudden uptick of amateurs winning primaries and enter Congress. Explanations for how inexperienced candidates make their way into office tend to focus on supply-side variables: how candidate entry and the choices made available to voters create opportunities for inexperienced candidates to win. Canon (1990) examines how celebrities with political ambition and high name recognition win office. He finds that such candidates emerged and won office when parties held more open nomination contests and in elections in which minority parties gained seats. Work by Roberds and Roberts (2002) builds on this work and shows that “competitive amateurs” (i.e. those

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<sup>1</sup>Brat lost his own bid for reelection in 2018 to Abigail Spanberger, a Democratic candidate without prior experience in elective office.

who held non-elective office or are lawyers) make entry decisions much like “quality” (experience in elective office) candidates. These types of inexperienced candidates might see increased success because of their previous occupations providing them with relevant skills, despite not having experience in elective office. More recent work by Porter and Treul (2019) focuses on the success of inexperienced candidates in congressional elections and finds that the relatively recent increase in the success of inexperienced candidates is best explained by an increase in PAC contributions beginning in 2012 and much of this money going to these inexperienced candidates during the primary campaign. Their work shows that inexperienced candidates today are able to compete with their more experienced counterparts, at least in part thanks to money.

These supply-side explanations notwithstanding, the extent of citizen *demand* for inexperienced candidates remains unclear. Most of the available evidence for the experience advantage comes from analyses of election outcomes (Jacobson, 1989; Mondak, 1995; Buttice and Stone, 2012). However, a wide variety of factors shape voters ultimate decisions on real-life candidates, such as the candidates’ party affiliation, issue priorities, or other demographic and personality traits. It is very difficult to discern from election outcomes whether citizens actually want experienced candidates more than inexperienced candidates, or whether they settle for experienced candidates given the competing considerations they must weigh in casting a ballot.

Some evidence from the literature on candidate evaluations brings into question whether citizens prefer experienced candidates. Fridkin and Kenney (2011) asked voters to evaluate candidates in 21 races for U.S. Senate seats in 2006, finding that voters relied more heavily upon their perceptions of candidates’ traits than campaign messages to form their

opinions. While respondents tended to rate challenger candidates with greater experience slightly more positively, experience had no significant association with incumbent evaluations. In comparison, respondents rated both incumbents and challengers much more highly if they perceived the candidates to be leaders or to be honest and caring. These findings suggests that experience is a marginal consideration compared to other candidate traits.

Given the rise in success of inexperienced candidates in the last two congressional elections, it is possible that Americans' opinions on candidate experience have undergone a shift. Political observers have noticed a rise in populist sentiment in the U.S. and Western Europe, citing the emergence of right-wing populist parties in continental Europe, the 2016 vote for Brexit in the U.K., and the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the U.S. (Akkerman et al., 2014; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Accompanying this rise of populism seems to be a growing "representation gap," in which American voters feel neither party adequately voices their opinions on the issues (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, trust in the political process is low. Americans mistrust government and mistrust members of opposing political parties (Hetherington, 2015; Hetherington and Weiler, 2018). A rise in populist sentiment might empower citizens to demand inexperienced candidates outside the political establishment to enter elected offices and make political changes. Whether populism or anti-establishment sentiment can explain a preference for inexperience remains an open question, one we explore further in the following section.

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<sup>2</sup>Oliver and Rahn (2016) note that a similar period when the representation gap was prominent was the mid-1990s. It is likely no coincidence that this period saw a movement to impose term limits on legislators. Though the movement failed to achieve its objective at the national level, more than a dozen states imposed term limits on their lawmakers around this time.

## Disentangling Inexperience and Anti-Establishment Rhetoric

While inexperience itself might be attractive to voters who sense a lack of representation in the political system or mistrust government, inexperience may simply be a trait that symbolizes what those voters truly desire: a change in the political status quo. Inexperienced candidates frequently tout their own lack of political experience as a testament to their ability to bring change to political institutions. As a result of such claims, political journalists and pundits often conflate candidates' lack of experience and their stance toward the political establishment. The terms outsider and populist are frequently thrown into the mix, adding even more confusion.

Literature in political science is pretty clear on the definition of “inexperience”—typically relying on Jacobson, 1989’s “quality” candidate dichotomy. That is, if the person held previous elective office, the person is considered a “quality” (i.e. experienced) candidate. However, even academic literature on inexperienced versus anti-establishment (versus populist) candidates is muddled, leaving one to wonder if an inexperienced candidate is by default an anti-establishment candidate or whether all anti-establishment candidates are all certain to be inexperienced.

Anti-establishment rhetoric captures the politics of opposition to those wielding power, suggesting an anti-establishment appeal would be one where ‘the people’ are pitted against the power elite (Barr, 2009). This anti-establishment rhetoric is separate from rhetorical appeals that address the candidate’s position vis-a-vis the political establishment (Kenney, 1998; Barr, 2009). According to Barr (2009) and Oliver and Rahn (2016) a variety of



political actors use anti-establishment rhetoric, but populists are particularly known for doing so. In fact, anti-establishment rhetoric is one of the defining characteristics of populism (Canovan, 1981; de la Torre, 2000). Even though Canovan (1981) makes a case for populism having a proximate message of politics escaping popular control and that citizens, “have been shut out of power by corrupt politicians and an unrepresentative elite” (Canovan, 2002, 27), she also notes that this anti-elite rhetoric is but one aspect of the populist phenomenon.

Given that anti-establishment rhetoric is just one part of populism, the remainder of this discussion sets populism aside and focuses on just anti-establishment rhetoric. If anti-establishment rhetoric is used to demonstrate opposition to those currently in power, the success of such appeals depends on the “ability of the political actor to convince potential supporters that he indeed stands in opposition to, and is not part of, the entrenched power structure” (Barr, 2009, 32). An anti-establishment appeal is one in which there is stated opposition to those wielding power. If a candidate is a current officeholder, anti-establishment rhetoric can be used, so long as the candidate is able to convince potential supporters that even though she is on the “inside,” she works in opposition to the current government and its power structure and is not a part of it (Barr, 2009). While this seems fairly straightforward, assessing anti-establishment rhetoric in a democracy is challenging and therefore must be precise. After all, most all politicians in a democracy are going to claim to be of and for “the people.” Therefore, simply using “of the people” rhetoric is not enough to prove one’s anti-elitism. Anti-establishment rhetoric must go one step further and claim there is a crisis (Moffitt, 2015; Pappas, 2012). Toward this end, anti-establishment rhetoric is often direct, emotional, and frequently indelicate (Canovan,

1999; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014).

Despite the common association made between a candidate's experience and her stance toward the establishment, it seems clear that the two are separate characteristics. A candidate can be inexperienced (non-quality) or experienced (quality) and run on an anti-establishment platform. For example, in 2016 Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders ran for the Republican and Democratic nominations respectively on anti-establishment platforms. In fact, both campaigns were frequently labeled "populists" by pundits and the media. However, Trump had never held elected office, while Bernie Sanders had served in Congress since 1991. Nonetheless, Sanders could utilize anti-establishment rhetoric successfully because the appeal does not depend on one's position in the political system (Kenney, 1998). The anti-establishment appeal simply demonstrates opposition to the power structure status quo.

We briefly note that if experience and rhetoric are separable, it should also be the case that inexperienced candidates can run a campaign as an establishment candidate. Take for example Congresswoman Donna Shalala (FL-27), the former HHS secretary under President Bill Clinton, who ran her campaign in part on her experience in Washington. Strictly speaking, Shalala would qualify as an "inexperienced" candidate, having never held elected office before her Congressional run. Throughout the campaign, Shalala argued that her experience in government—eight years as President Bill Clinton's health and human services secretary—and her ties to businesses and governments worldwide through her running of the Clinton Foundation while Hillary Clinton was campaigning for president, should be seen as a plus.<sup>3</sup> Shalala's opponents, on the other hand, fre-

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<sup>3</sup>Shalala also emphasized her experience as the president of the University of Miami, the chancellor of

quently used these very credentials against her, calling her a “corporate Democrat” and “part of the establishment” (Pogrund, 2018).

While candidates in both parties used anti-establishment rhetoric, the work of Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) demonstrates that Democrats’ anti-establishment rhetoric focuses on economic elites, the Republicans’ tends to focus more directly on political targets. This remained true in 2016, with candidate Donald Trump and candidate Ben Carson, two of the Republican candidates (both inexperienced candidates as well), scoring the highest on a “word dictionary” that captured “Political populism” and candidate Bernie Sanders, a Democratic candidate, scoring the highest on a “word dictionary” meant to capture “Economic populism” (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).

In summary, one can use anti-establishment rhetoric without being a populist (though it is often used by populists) and that one can be either a political insider (i.e. a quality candidate) or a political novice and use anti-establishment rhetoric. In the United States, a candidate for office can be inexperienced or experienced and both of these types can use anti-establishment rhetoric. By making this distinction between inexperience and anti-establishment rhetoric, we are able to experimentally manipulate a candidate’s rhetoric to distinguish voter demand for inexperience from demand for political change. The goal is to determine whether voters can make a distinction between political experience and anti-establishment rhetoric and, then, if it is experience or rhetoric that matters most to voters.

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the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and president of the Clinton Foundation in her campaign.

## Hypotheses

While inexperience and anti-establishment rhetoric are conceptually distinct, it remains to be seen whether voters make that distinction. On one hand some voters might genuinely prefer inexperience, regardless of candidates' campaign rhetoric. In fact, information about candidates' traits, like their experience (or lack thereof), more strongly predict their evaluations of candidates than the candidates' messages (Fridkin and Kenney, 2011). We test the hypothesis:

*H1*: Respondents evaluate inexperienced candidates more positively than experienced candidates.

On the other hand, voters seem to express a preference for experienced officeholders at the ballot box by voting them into office. Incumbents win reelection at high rates, taking into account any scare-off effect on quality challengers (Ban et al., 2016). It could be that voters do not sincerely prefer inexperience, but instead respond positively to the anti-establishment rhetoric that inexperienced candidates frequently use to justify their inexperience. We also test the hypothesis:

*H2*: Respondents evaluate candidates using anti-establishment rhetoric more positively than candidates using pro-establishment rhetoric.

## Data and Methods

To gather data on public preferences for inexperience and anti-establishment rhetoric, we included a battery of questions in the recent Politics in the Field at the University of North

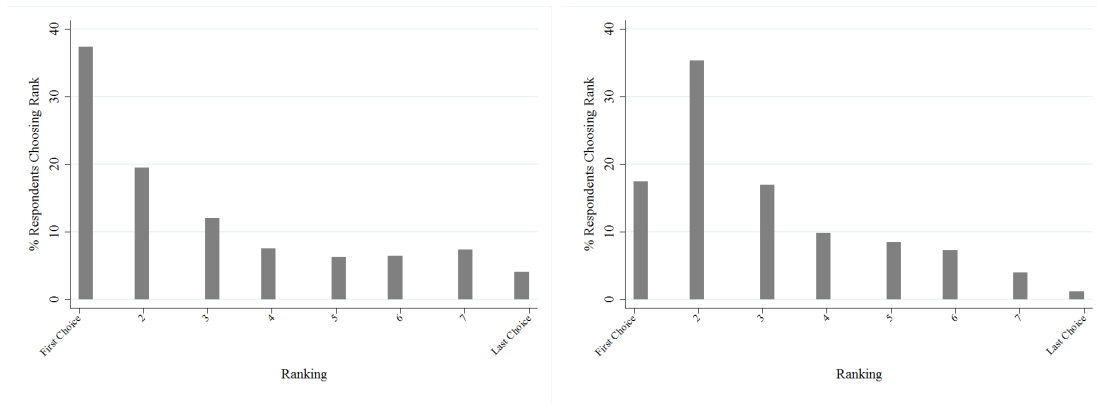
Carolina (P-FUNC) survey. P-FUNC is a multi-investigator examination of Americans' political, racial, and social attitudes in which several research teams fielded modules for various purposes, while coordinating to measure standard demographics. Respondents were recruited by Qualtrics, which maintains a panel of survey participants recruited to match Census demographics. The survey had two waves. Our module was exclusively in Wave 1. Respondents completed the survey online between November 27 and December 20, 2018.

Before moving to an explicit test of the hypotheses, we conduct an exploratory analysis of Americans' preferences for prior officeholders. Doing so allows us to determine the extent of Americans' preferences for candidate experience, and to understand what factors predict a preference for experience. First, we provide descriptive data illustrating Americans' preferences for different types of pre-election experience. Then, we explore the relationships between a number of attitudinal and demographic variables to preferences for prior officeholding experience.

We included three items on the survey that asked respondents to decide what type of experience they valued in Congressional candidates. Exact question wording for each of these items is provided in the appendix. The first two items asked respondents to read a short list of prior experiences: prior elected office, law, business, military, professional career, service/labor, or other. Respondents were instructed to rank the experiences by (1) how much they wish their own member of Congress had that experience and (2) how well these occupations prepare someone to serve in Congress. In the former case only, an option for an incumbent MC was included.

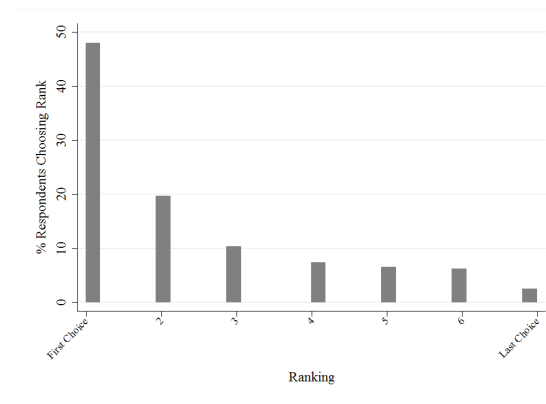
Figure 1 summarizes respondents' selections in response to each of these items. Panels

Figure 1: Respondent Rankings of Prior Officeholders by Criteria



Panel A: Desire (Incumbent)

Panel B: Desire (Prior Elected)



Panel C: Preparedness

A and B display the distribution of rankings in terms of the experiences that respondents most wish their own member had. Panel A displays a ranking for incumbency. Just over a third of respondents (37.3%), a plurality, ranked incumbency as their top choice for their member’s desired experience, while more than two thirds (68.7%) ranked it among their top three. Panel B displays the rankings for prior elected experience other than incumbency. Prior officeholding in this case was the plurality second choice, second to incumbency. Less than a fifth of respondents (17.4%) placed other elected experience as their top choice, but a third (35.3%) placed it as their second choice. Altogether, more than two thirds of respondents (69.6%) indicated prior officeholding experience as one of

their top three choices for their member's prior occupation.

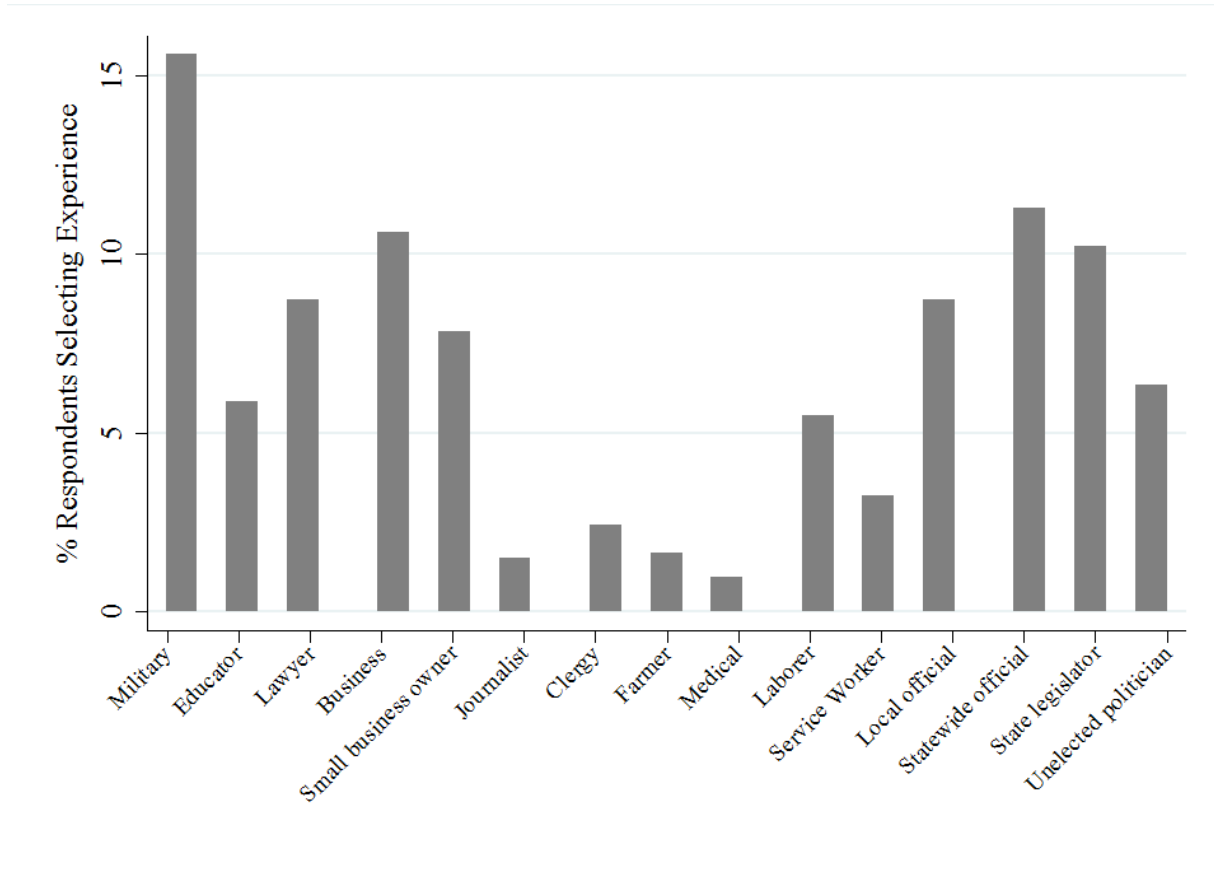
Panel C displays the distribution of rankings respondents assigned to prior officeholders based on preparedness. The panel indicates that nearly half of respondents (47.9%) replied that prior officeholding best prepares someone to hold office. Near four out of five respondents (77.8%) included prior officeholding in their top three choices.

A third item asked respondents to indicate which one experience from a longer list of experiences they thought would make an MC most effective in office. Figure 2 presents the distribution of respondents' choices. A plurality of respondents chose a military background as best preparing respondents (15.6%). The next three most selected experiences were statewide officials (11.3%), people with business experience (10.6%), and state legislators (10.2%). Combining local officials, state legislators, and statewide officials, 30.2% of respondents believed a prior elected official would be most effective as an MC.

To determine what factors predict a preference for prior experience, we transformed these rankings into binary variables. *Preferred* indicates that a respondent chose either an incumbent MC or a prior officeholder as the experience the respondent most wish their member had. *Most Prepared* indicates that a respondent chose prior officeholding as the experience that best prepares someone to serve in Congress. *Most Effective* indicates that a respondent chose prior officeholding as the experience that makes a member most effective once in Congress. The latter two items do not measure a preference for experience in a strict sense, but they likely tap into a positive affect for certain types of experience.

To determine what factors are related to a preference for prior officeholding experience, we conducted a multiple regression analysis taking into account a number of respondent attitudes and characteristics. First, though we distinguish the two concepts above the-

Figure 2: Which Experience Makes MCs Effective?



oretically, a preference for inexperience is likely related to anti-establishment sentiment. Feelings of marginalization in the political and economic system could be directed against current officeholders, though they could also be directed against other elites like intellectuals or billionaires. To measure this sentiment, we included a battery of 11 items developed by Oliver and Rahn (2016). The items asked respondents to agree or disagree with statements like, “It doesn’t really matter who you vote for because the rich control both political parties,” “The system is stacked against people like me,” and “I’d rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts and intellectuals.” The full wording of included items is provided in the appendix. Like Oliver and Rahn (2016), we find distinct patterns in the data from the items, with a strong first



factor capturing anti-elitism and weaker second and third factors capturing a mistrust of experts and nationalism respectively. Following these authors, we derived a factor score from the first factor measuring *Anti-Elite Sentiment*. Loadings from the factor analysis and a scree plot are provided in the appendix.

More Americans express greater mistrust in governing institutions today than in the past (Hetherington, 2015; Hetherington and Weiler, 2018). We asked respondents on a five-point scale, “How much trust and confidence do you have in our Congress in Washington?” To measure broader social trust, we also asked respondents on a five-point scale, “How often can people be trusted?” Responses ranged from “Always” to “Never.” We expect lower levels of trust to be associated with a preference for inexperienced candidates, due to amateurs’ separation from a political system and institution perceived to be corrupt.

Having prior elected experience before taking higher elected office has become a norm in American politics in recent decades. Some Americans may view politics hierarchically and see prior experience as a necessary condition for ascending to positions of authority. Individuals with such authoritarian views may reject claims that unconventional candidates are better equipped to hold office than those who have followed the traditional path to office. To measure such attitudes, we included six items related to child rearing, with wording borrowed from Hetherington and Weiler (2018). An additive scale from these items was constructed to create the variable *Authoritarianism*.

Feelings of marginalization by a political elite are often characterized as occurring along class boundaries, with people at the bottom portrayed as suspicious of people at the top. As a measure of socioeconomic status, we included five-point scales for respondents’

*Education* and *Income*. Individual opinions on political marginalization might also result from their sense of upward or downward economic mobility, rather than their overall socioeconomic status. We included a variable for *Economic Progress*. Respondents were asked on a five-point scale how their family’s economic condition has changed over the last year. Options ranged from “Gotten much worse” to “Gotten much better.”

Porter and Treul (2019) find a sharper increase in inexperience among Republican candidates than Democratic candidates in recent election cycles. Furthermore, anti-establishment rhetoric has been associated with the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party (Skocpol and Williamson, 2016). Together, these findings suggest that Republicans or conservatives might be more inclined to favor inexperienced candidates than Democrats or liberals. We include measures of respondents’ party identification (indicators for *Republican* and *Democrat* with independents being the reference group) and self-identified ideology (*Conservative* or *Liberal* with moderates and others being the reference group).

Finally, we controlled for respondents’ gender and race/ethnicity. We included binary indicators for whether a respondent is *Male* and for whether a respondent identifies as *White*, *Black*, or *Hispanic* (with all others being the reference group). We analyzed the association between each of these independent variables and our binary outcome measures using logistic regression. We present the results of the analysis in Table 1.

We begin by surveying the results from the leftmost column of Table 1, the factors that predict a respondent choosing a prior officeholding as their top preference for their own member’s experience. In line with expectations, anti-elite sentiment is negatively associated with preferring a prior officeholder, as is conservative ideology. Greater trust

Table 1: Who Prefers Prior Experience?

	Preferred	Most Prepared	Most Effective
Anti-Elite Sentiment	-0.23* (0.06)	-0.17* (0.06)	-0.19* (0.06)
Trust in People	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.14* (0.05)	-0.06 (0.06)
Trust in Congress	0.30* (0.07)	0.20* (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)
Authoritarianism	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Economic Progress	-0.19* (0.06)	-0.11* (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)
Republican	0.03 (0.14)	-0.05 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.15)
Democrat	0.37* (0.13)	0.25* (0.13)	0.28* (0.13)
Male	-0.18 (0.10)	-0.31* (0.10)	-0.42* (0.10)
White	-0.13 (0.18)	0.02 (0.17)	-0.02 (0.18)
Black	0.09 (0.21)	-0.08 (0.21)	0.18 (0.21)
Hispanic	0.02 (0.21)	-0.10 (0.20)	-0.45* (0.21)
Education	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Income	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Conservative	-0.47* (0.13)	-0.58* (0.13)	-0.37* (0.14)
Liberal	-0.26 (0.14)	-0.28* (0.13)	0.07 (0.13)
Intercept	0.83* (0.36)	0.85* (0.35)	-0.21 (0.36)
<i>N</i>	1848	1852	2030
BIC	2532.46	2567.93	2523.34

Note: \*p<0.05. Significance tests are two-tailed. Data from 2018 P-FUNC Survey.

in Congress as an institution and Democratic party identification are both positively associated with a preference for experience. Interestingly, respondents reporting their family has experienced economic gain in the past year were less likely to prefer prior experience, in contrast with the expectation that economic progress would lead to support for the political establishment. A speculative explanation is that perceptions of economic progress are tied to Donald Trump's presidency, the most prominent current example of an inexperienced politician in office. Respondents who perceive they've benefitted economically under his presidency may be more likely to put no stock in political experience. However, further theorizing and tests would be needed to explain this finding more fully. The remaining independent variables are not significantly related to the outcome variable.

In the second column of Table 1, similar factors seem to be at play in shaping respondents' estimation that prior officeholders are best prepared to serve in Congress. Anti-elite sentiment, economic progress, and conservative ideology continue to be negatively associated with selecting prior experience as the best preparation, while trust in Congress and Democratic party affiliation are positively associated. In addition, being male, holding a liberal ideology, and trusting other people are negatively associated with a belief that prior officeholding best prepares candidates for Congress. Finally in the third column, we see that respondents with anti-elite sentiments, men, Hispanics, and conservatives are less likely to think prior officeholding makes members of Congress more effective, while Democrats are more likely to think that's the case.

Summarizing the results from Table 1, it is clear that anti-elite and conservative respondents do not hold members with prior experience in high esteem. However, Democrats do consistently hold members with prior experience in high esteem. Other than these con-

sistent findings, the picture is more muddled. Gender, economic progress, and trust in Congress may play a role in shaping evaluations of candidates' experience as well. In none of the models are an authoritarian worldview, education, or income levels associated with views on experience. Race and ethnicity does not appear to strongly shape such views either.

A broad observation about these findings is that they appear to track the coalitional support for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016. While anti-elitists and conservatives marked experience down, Democrats approved of it—in line with how each side's candidate discussed their prior experience during the 2016 campaign. It could be the case that respondents are drawing upon their evaluations of experience from that campaign, rather than thinking concretely about what experience they want for their Congressional candidates. If that were the case, the findings could be interpreted to suggest that voters fit their views on experience to justify candidates they like for other reasons—specifically, partisan or ideological reasons. It would also suggest that voters have weak *a priori* views on candidate experience. However, we cannot show direct evidence to this point using the data we have analyzed so far. In the following section, we proceed to test the hypotheses above using an experiment embedded in the same survey.

## Experimental Results

There seem to be partisan differences in respondents' expressed preferences for prior officeholding experience. However, it could be the case that respondents are conflating a lack of prior experience with a negative stance toward Washington or politics. In the case of the 2016 Presidential election, these two factors happened to overlap with the candi-

dates. However, inexperience and anti-establishment do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, as explained above.

To distinguish these two factors, we designed a 2 X 2 factorial design experiment to include in the P-FUNC national survey administered by Qualtrics. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups in which they read a vignette about a Congressional candidate. The vignette wordings were intended to evoke four styles of candidates: an experienced establishment candidate, an inexperienced establishment candidate, an experienced anti-establishment candidate, and an inexperienced anti-establishment candidate. Respondents assigned to read about an experienced establishment candidate were shown the following vignette:

[REDACTED] announced that he is running for a seat in the U.S. House. [REDACTED] is a 20 year veteran of the state legislature. [REDACTED] has strong ties to the [REDACTED] Party as a powerbroker and top fundraiser for the party in the state. [REDACTED] released this statement with the announcement of his candidacy:

“Washington needs fewer bomb-throwers and more problem-solvers. Change can be slow and sometimes we have to compromise, but we can make this country stronger and more prosperous by working together. I’m running to be your voice in Congress.”

Respondents assigned to read about an inexperienced, anti-establishment candidate were shown the following vignette:

[REDACTED] announced that he is running for a seat in the U.S. House. [REDACTED] is a first-time candidate for elected office. [REDACTED] wants to be an independent voice in Congress and won’t be afraid to take his party to task when politics are put before people. [REDACTED] released this statement with the announcement of his candidacy:

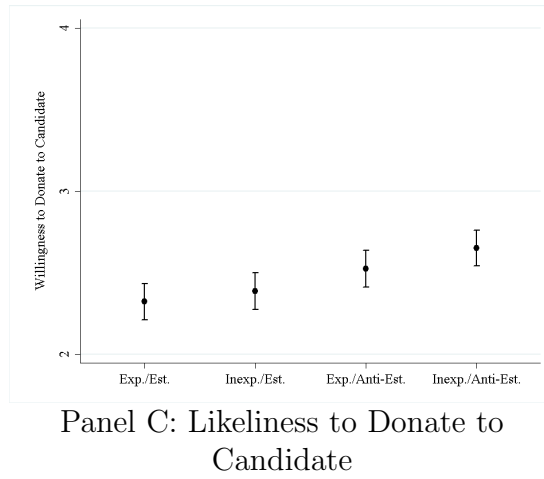
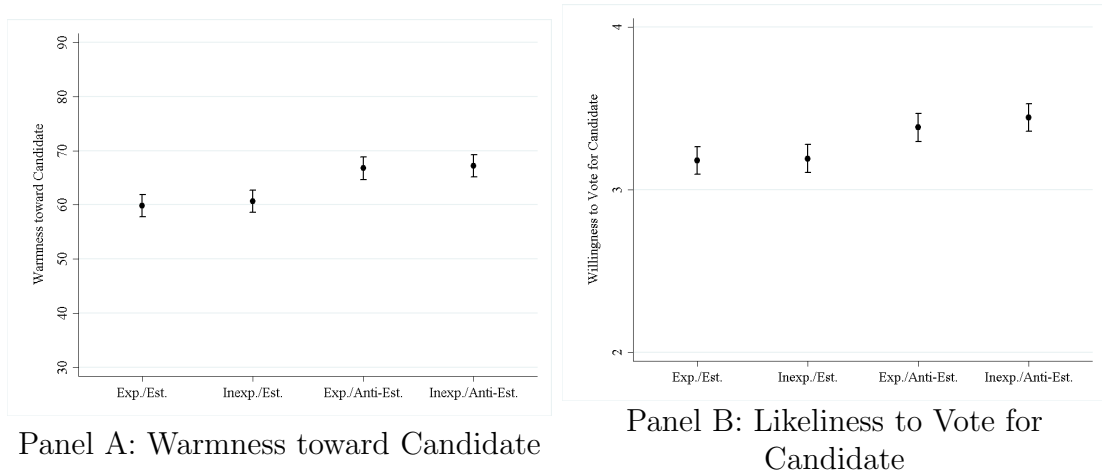
“Washington is controlled by corrupt special interests and career politicians who care more about reelection than about doing what’s right. I’m running for Congress to fight for this district and to restore power where it belongs: the American people.”

The statements varied on two dimensions. The first was experience: the candidate was either a first-time candidate or a 20-year veteran of the state legislature. The second was the candidate’s stance toward politics. The candidate was either establishment in working for as a party powerbroker and having a consensus-building attitude towards politics, or anti-establishment in being skeptical of his party and of the Washington status quo. The experienced, anti-establishment candidate and the inexperienced, establishment candidate treatments used similar wordings to above, but matched the experience and message as appropriate.

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked to respond using three outcome measures. First, respondents rated the candidate a 0-100 feeling thermometer, with higher values indicating a warmer response to the candidate. Second, respondents indicated their likelihood of voting for such a candidate on a five-point scale. Third, respondents indicated their likelihood of donating \$10 to the candidate’s campaign on a five-point scale. We estimated the treatment effects from assignment to each condition relative to the designated control group, the experienced establishment candidate. The table of OLS regression models is provided in the appendix.

Figure 3 displays the predicted values of each outcome across treatments. We begin with Panel A, which reports the predicted values of respondent warmth toward the candidate. Respondents were lukewarm toward the experienced/establishment candidate

Figure 3: Candidate Evaluations across Treatment Groups



(mean = 59.85 on a 100-point scale). Moving to the inexperienced/establishment candidate, respondent evaluations are slightly warmer, but not significantly warmer (0.79,  $p = 0.60$ ). This finding does not comport with the first hypothesis—at least when respondents are presented candidates with establishment messages, respondents do not favor inexperienced candidates over experienced ones.

Turning to the treatments presenting a candidate with an anti-establishment message, we see a significant increase in respondent warmth. Compared to an experienced/establishment candidate, respondents rated an experienced/anti-establishment



candidate received nearly seven points higher on the feeling thermometer (6.92,  $p = 0.00$ ). This finding supports the second hypothesis that respondents rate anti-establishment candidates more highly than establishment candidates, holding experience constant.

We see a similar finding in the fourth condition, with respondents giving a similar bump (7.32,  $p = 0.00$ ) to the inexperienced/anti-establishment candidate compared to the experienced/anti-establishment candidate. Respondents do not rate the inexperienced/anti-establishment candidate significantly more highly than his more experienced counterpart with the same message (0.40,  $p = 0.79$ ). The anti-establishment message in the fourth condition also seems to be driving the increase in respondent warmth when compared to the inexperienced/establishment candidate in the second condition; respondents feel significantly more warmly toward the former than the latter (6.53,  $p = 0.00$ ). These comparisons continue to lend little support to the first hypothesis but strong support to the second hypothesis.

In Panel B of Figure experiment, we see a similar pattern emerge when respondents are asked their likelihood of voting for the candidate on a 5-point Likert scale. Again, we see little difference in respondents' likelihood of voting for an experienced or an inexperienced establishment candidate (0.01,  $p = 0.85$ ). However, respondents report they are significantly more likely to vote for both the experienced/anti-establishment candidate (0.20,  $p = 0.00$ ) and the inexperienced/anti-establishment candidate (0.26,  $p = 0.00$ ) compared with the experienced/establishment candidate. Respondents also do not draw a noticeable distinction between anti-establishment candidates on the basis of experience (0.06,  $p = 0.35$ ).

Panel C shows results if we ask respondents if they'd consider making a \$10 donation

to the candidate presented. Similarly to the other two panels, experience does not make a difference in responses to the two establishment candidates (0.06,  $p = 0.42$ ). However, respondents express more willingness to donate to both the experienced/anti-establishment candidate (0.20,  $p = 0.01$ ) and the inexperienced/anti-establishment candidate (0.33,  $p = 0.00$ ) than the experienced/establishment candidate. The responses on the basis of experience between the anti-establishment candidates, though substantively larger than in the previous panels, are not significantly different (0.13,  $p = 0.13$ ). However, only in this panel do we see respondents not rate the experienced/anti-establishment candidate significantly more highly than the inexperienced/establishment candidate (0.14,  $p = 0.09$ ) at the .05 level of confidence, though the difference is significant at the .1 level.

Taken together, these results provide little evidence in support of the first hypothesis, that respondents prefer inexperienced candidates to experienced candidates. Nor do they support the opposite conclusion, that experienced candidates are preferred. In fact, the experimental findings consistently show that respondents do not give much weight to experience, rating candidates with same message roughly the same across on all different outcomes. However, the findings provide fairly strong evidence in support of the second hypothesis. Respondents on average were more likely to feel warmly toward the anti-establishment candidates, express a likelihood to vote for them, and express a willingness to consider donating to them, regardless of candidate experience.

## Discussion

The growing success of inexperienced candidates in recent Congressional elections raises the question of whether American opinion is shifting on the matter of candidate expe-

rience. Though scholars have documented the advantage that experienced candidates received at the ballot box (Jacobson, 1989; Mondak, 1995; Buttice and Stone, 2012) and have provided structural, supply-side reasons for the success of amateurs (Canon, 1990; Roberds and Roberts, 2002; Porter and Treul, 2019), few studies have explored voter preferences for experience (though see Fridkin and Kenney, 2011).

In an exploratory analysis of preferences for Congressional candidate experience, we find that a plurality, but not a majority, of respondents prefer a member of Congress with prior elected experience to represent them. Similarly, pluralities, but not majorities, of Americans believe that members with prior elected experience are most prepared to serve and most effective once in office. However, Americans suspicious of the political establishment are less likely to prefer experienced candidates to be their own representatives and less likely to think they are prepared or effective. Attitudes also break down along partisan and ideological lines, with Democrats (but not liberals) preferring experienced candidates and conservatives (but not Republicans) preferring inexperienced candidates.

Despite these differences in respondents' expressed preferences between candidate backgrounds, experimental results point to the conclusion that Americans do not weigh experience strongly when evaluating candidates. Respondents did not reward candidates for their experience or for their newcomer status. However, respondents consistently rewarded candidates that expressed anti-establishment rhetoric, regardless of their experience. Our findings suggest that candidate message matters to voters more than candidate experience, though more evidence would be needed varying different types of candidate messages or differing levels of candidate experience to draw that conclusion more firmly.

Given the lack of prior evidence on Americans' preferences for experience, it is difficult

to say whether Americans are coming to value experience less, even as populist sentiment in the U.S. seems to be on the rise (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Perhaps the disregard for experience suggested by the experimental results reflects a decline in the extent to which American values. Perhaps Americans have never truly cared about candidates' prior experience for its own sake.

We note that our observational and experimental evidence is limited to candidates' evaluations of Congressional candidates. There is good reason to suspect that these results would not translate to voter evaluations of Presidential candidates, given the different nature of the two jobs. Indeed, prior evidence suggests that Americans do weigh candidate traits like leadership differently when evaluating these two types of candidates (Hayes, 2010). That being said, we note the less experienced candidate in elected office has won the general election for President in each of the last three cycles when an incumbent was not on the ballot (2016, 2008, and 2000), at least hinting at the idea that experience was not an overriding concern for Americans in these contests either.<sup>4</sup>

Though experience itself may give candidates little additional traction when appealing to voters, it would be difficult to conclude that it does not matter to election outcomes. It is quite likely that the campaigning and officeholding skills that experienced candidates possess give them a leg up running for office. Experience might also be highly valued by party activists, donors, and other elected officials. These actors play an outsized role in recruiting candidates, culling the field in the primary by directing limited resources to certain campaigns, and signaling party support to average voters.

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<sup>4</sup>With the exception of 2012, the winners of all Presidential contests since 1992 had spent fewer total years in any elected office than their general election opponent had by Election Day.

Finally, the results bring into question how much candidates should stress experience on the stump. Certainly, Hillary Clinton's unsuccessful 2016 campaign for President has brought that point into relief in the political press. Talking about experience may present opportunity costs for candidates, foreclosing opportunities to speak about their vision for office or their other traits that voters value more highly. Experience does not provide a boost to candidates, but neither does it hang an albatross around experienced candidates' necks. So long as experienced candidates can credibly distance themselves from the political establishment in their party, they too may be able to reap electoral benefits from an anti-establishment messaging campaign.

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# Appendix

## Question Wording

### *Opinions of Prior Experience*

Please rank order (from 1-7) which professional BEST prepares someone to serve in Congress, with 1 being the BEST prepared and 7 being the LEAST prepared.

- Previous experience in elective office (e.g. state or local legislator/mayor)
- Lawyer
- Business experience
- Military
- Professional (e.g. physician, teacher)
- Service worker or laborer
- Other (please specify option)

Please rank order (from 1-8) what experience you MOST wish your member of Congress had, with 1 being the MOST and 8 being the LEAST.

- Currently serves in Congress (an incumbent)
- Previous experience in elective office (e.g. state or local legislator/mayor)
- Lawyer
- Business experience
- Military
- Professional (e.g. physician, teacher)
- Service worker or laborer
- Other (please specify option)

Of the following prior careers, which do you think would MOST help your member of Congress be effective?

- Military officer or veteran
- Teacher/professor
- Lawyer/non-elected judge
- Business/finance experience (e.g. CEO, manager, banker)
- Small business owner
- Journalist/media experience
- Religious official/clergy (e.g. pastor, rabbi)

- Farmer/rancher
- Medical doctor/dentist/veterinarian
- Manual laborer (e.g. factory worker, construction worker)
- Service worker (e.g. cashier, customer service)
- Local elected office (e.g. mayor, city council member, sheriff)
- State-wide elected office (e.g. governor, attorney general)
- State senator or state representative
- Unelected political experience (e.g. aide, advisor, community organizer)

***Populism Battery, adapted from Oliver and Rahn (2016)***

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements [5-pt Likert scale]

- People like me don't have much say in what government does.
- Politics usually boils down to a struggle between the people and the powerful.
- The system is stacked against people like me.
- It doesn't really matter who you vote for because the rich control both political parties.
- I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts and intellectuals.
- When it comes to really important questions, scientific facts don't help very much.
- Ordinary people can really use the help of experts to understand complicated things like science and health.
- Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.

People at the top usually get there...

- because they have more talent and work harder.
- from some unfair advantage.

I generally consider myself to be...

- different from most Americans.
- like most other Americans.

Which of these two statements do you agree with more?

- It would be unwise to trust the judgments of the American people for today's complicated political issues.
- I generally trust the collective judgments of the American people, even for complex political issues.

## Factor Analysis

Table 2: Rotated Principal Factor Loadings

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
People like me don't have much say in what government does.	0.59		
Politics usually boils down to a struggle between the people and the powerful.	0.59		
The system is stacked against people like me.	0.73		
It doesn't really matter who you vote for because the rich control both political parties.	0.67		
I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts and intellectuals.		0.50	
When it comes to really important questions, scientific facts don't help very much.		0.57	
Ordinary people can really use the help of experts to understand complicated things like science and health.	0.13	-0.15	
Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.	0.38	0.36	
People at the top usually get there because they have more talent and work harder.	-0.25		
I generally consider myself to be like most other Americans.			0.42
I generally trust the collective judgments of the American people, even for complex political issues.			0.44

Figure 4: Scree Plot of Principal Factors

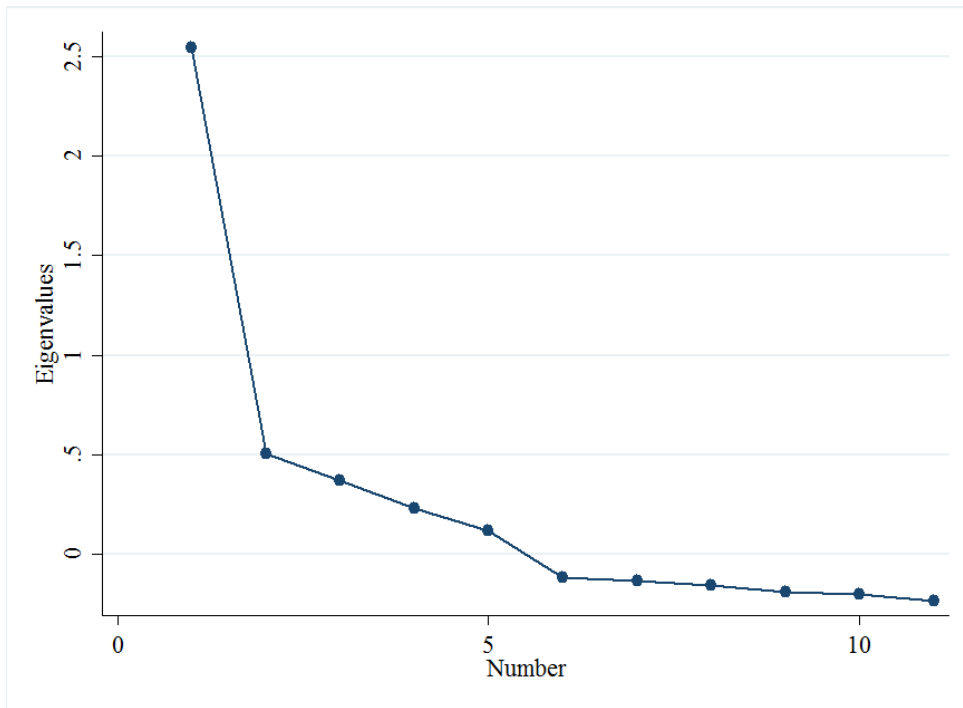


Table 3: OLS Regression Results for Experimental Treatments

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Affect	Vote	Donate
Inexperienced/ Establishment	0.79 (1.49)	0.01 (0.06)	0.06 (0.08)
Experienced/ Anti-Establishment	6.92* (1.50)	0.20* (0.06)	0.20* (0.08)
Inexperienced/ Anti-Establishment	7.32* (1.48)	0.26* (0.06)	0.33* (0.08)
Constant	59.85* (1.05)	3.18* (0.04)	2.32* (0.06)
$N$	2050	2050	2050
Adj. $R^2$	0.02	0.01	0.01

*Note:* \* $p < 0.05$ . Significance tests are two-tailed. Data from 2018 P-FUNC Survey. Experienced/established candidate serves as reference condition.