

## ABSTRACT

By selecting the pool of candidates that voters can choose from in the general election, party nominating contests play a fundamental role in determining the outcome of elections at all levels of government. However, past research has indicated that, due largely to the incumbency advantage, primary competition has declined dramatically since the institution’s origins. Strategic entry theory suggests that skilled candidates, often those holding prior political office, wait for the most opportune chance to run for higher office. To test this hypothesis, I collected data on all congressional districts and candidates from the 2014 midterm elections. Using candidate information gathered from the Federal Election Commission and other candidate databases, district level demographic and political data, and incumbent statistics, I developed a model using the individual and structural factors to predict when an experienced politician will challenge an incumbent within their own party. The data show that strong intraparty challenges are rare compared to cross-party challenges, and that the most ideologically centrist incumbents, of either party, are the most likely to be “primaried” by an experienced and ambitious challenger.

## THEORY

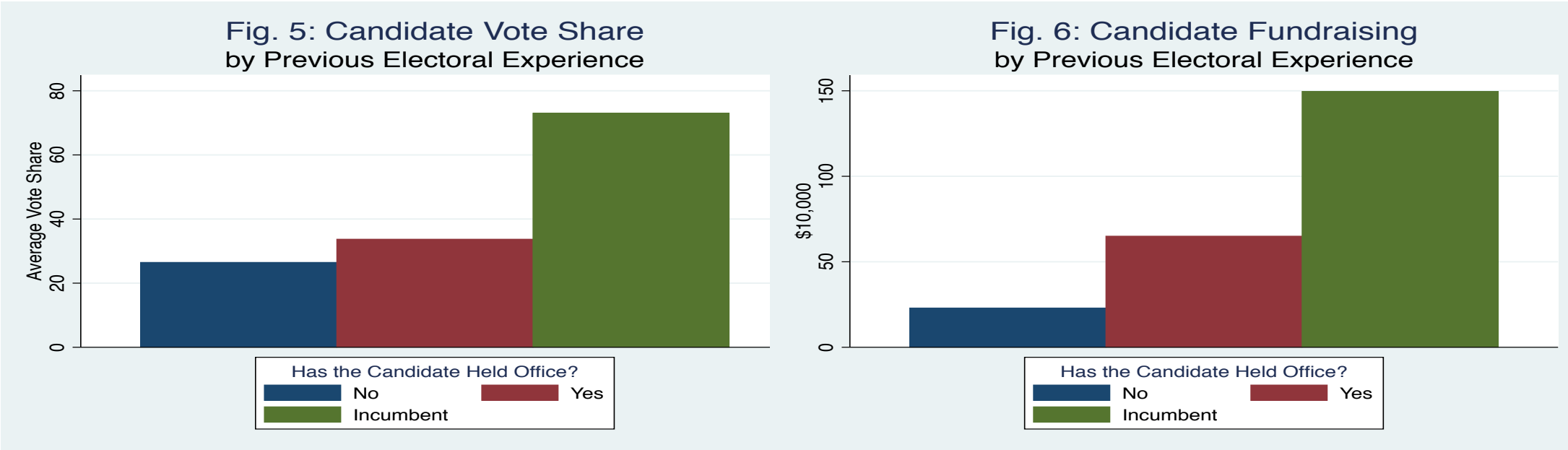
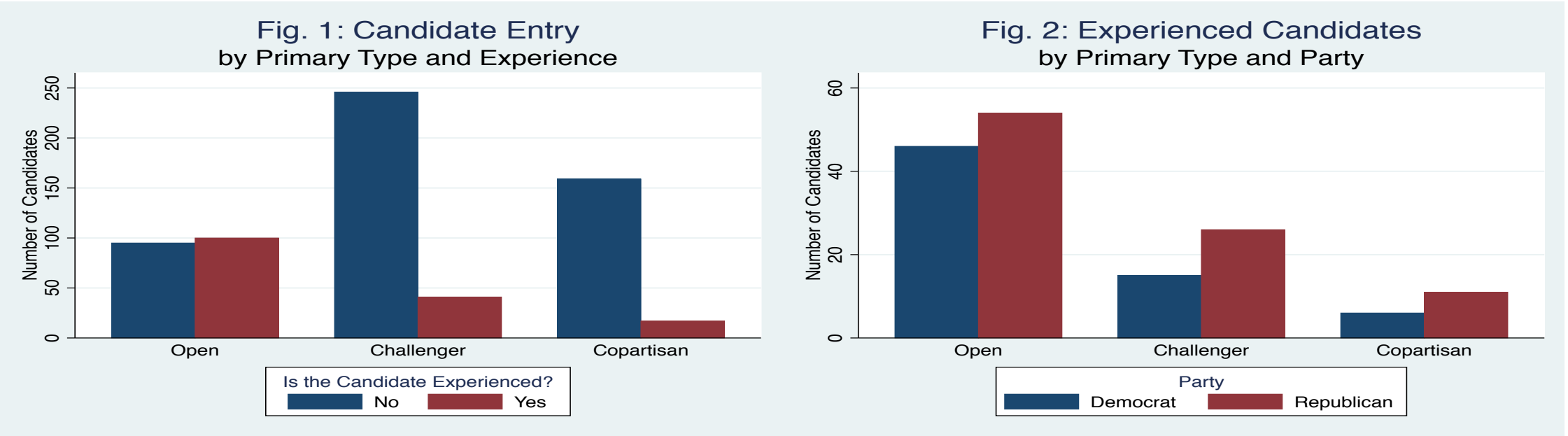
Strategic entry theory suggests that experienced candidates, those holding prior political office, will wait for the most opportune chance to seek higher office. When they do so, they will leverage their name recognition, connections, skills, and resources to maximize their chances of victory. Most previous studies of strategic entry focus on cross-party challenges to incumbents, rather than intra-party primary contests. Previous findings suggest that four factors may predict a potential experienced primary challenge: H1) an ideologically moderate incumbent, H2) low incumbent margin of victory, H3) high levels of district partisanship, and H4) other indicators of incumbent weakness, such as a high unemployment rate. I analyze how these factors contribute to strategic candidate entry.

## METHODS

I collected data on all 2014 congressional primary candidates, excluding those from states using nonpartisan or “jungle” primaries or nominating conventions. Information, including data on candidate fundraising, demographics, vote share, and experience, was obtained from the Federal Election Commission, Secretary of States’ websites, and a comprehensive survey of candidate sites and newspaper reports. Using a dichotomous variable coded “1” for all candidates with prior elected or significant appointed office, and “0” for all others, data was analyzed using logit regressions. I supplemented this information with data on all congressional districts and incumbents in my sample. Using the Census Bureau and Secretary of States’ websites, basic demographic and economic information for each district was obtained, as well as previous vote totals. Using the Cook Political Report and DW-NOMINATE scores, I constructed a transformed scale measuring district partisanship and incumbent ideological extremism.

## RESULTS

- Figure 1 displays the number of candidates in each type of primary: those seeking open seats, “challengers”, those seeking the nomination to challenge an incumbent of the opposite party, and “copartisans”, seeking the nomination against an incumbent within their party and further divided by experience.
- Figure 2 breaks down the experienced candidates in figure 1 by party affiliation.
- Figure 3 describes predicted probabilities of an experienced candidate based on incumbent ideological extremism. “Moderate” describes an incumbent transformed DW-NOMINATE of .1, and “extremist” a score of 1.2.
- Figure 4 interacts incumbent extremism with district partisanship, with a “moderate” district assigned a transformed Cook Index score of 0, and a “partisan” district a score of 40.
- Figure 5 describes average candidate vote share, as a function of experience.
- Figure 6 reports candidate fundraising in total contributions, as a function of experience.



## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, I find that experienced politicians tend to act in a highly strategic fashion when choosing when to enter a race for the House of Representatives, particularly when seeking a party nomination

As expected, experienced candidates are significantly less likely to challenge an incumbent within their party than one from the opposing party, and considerably more inclined to run for open seats.

By far the strongest predictor of a strong copartisan challenge is incumbent ideological centrism, regardless of party affiliation. Ideologically extreme candidates face very few experienced primary challenges.

Despite expectations, district partisanship is not a powerful indicator of copartisan challenges, with strong challenges not significantly related to the strength of local partisanship. This suggests that ambitious politicians lack high levels of party loyalty, willing to risk a seat held by their party.

In terms of party differences, Democratic candidates tend to be more responsive to unemployment, while Republicans are sensitive to previous incumbent margins of victory.

Surprisingly, when controlling for fundraising, previous political experience does little to boost candidate vote share. However, strong candidates tend to raise significantly more money than their inexperienced counterparts.

In order to fully understand the candidate decision to challenge an incumbent within their own party, further research is necessary into individual candidate thought processes, as well as the characteristics of likely copartisan challengers.

Fig. 3: Predicted Probabilities of Experienced Challenge, by Primary Type and Incumbent Ideological Extremism

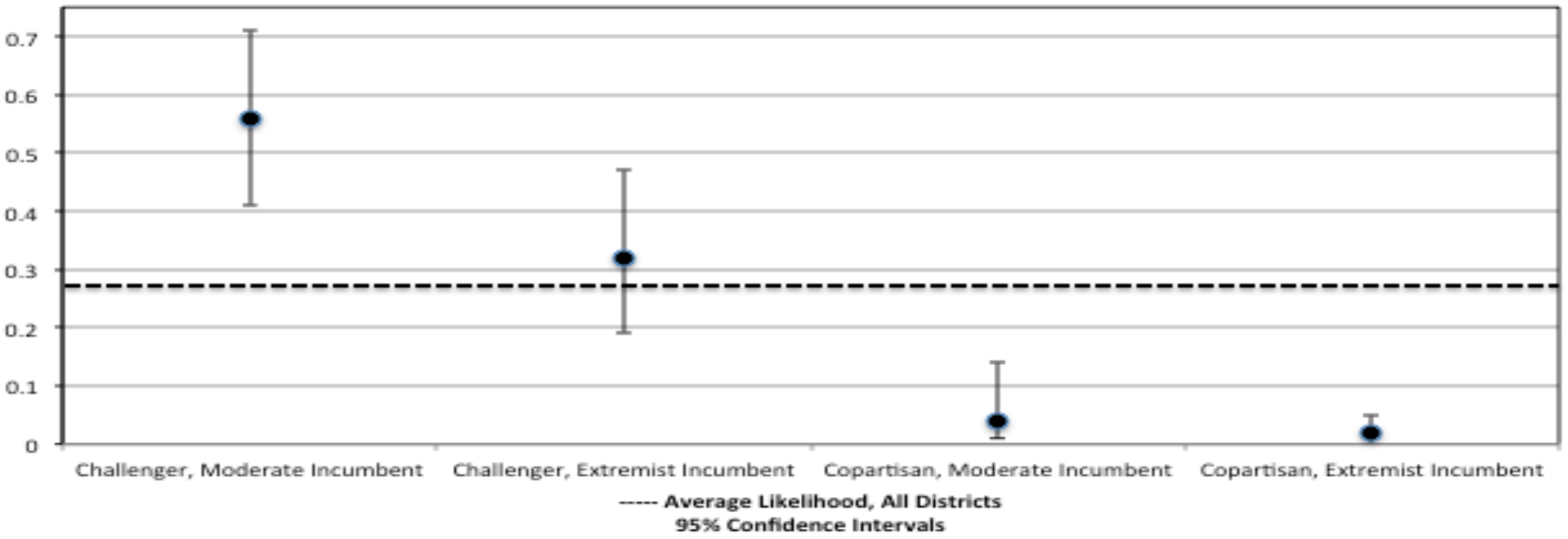


Fig. 4: Predicted Probabilities of Experienced Primary Challenge, by District Partisanship and Incumbent Ideological Extremism

