United States Senators as Presidential Candidates

BARRY C. BURDEN

Robert Dole was apparently more comfortable and successful as a senator than as a candidate for president of the United States. There was real concern within the Dole campaign in 1996 that his bid for the presidency was hindered by his position as a senator. The potential liability of his office became so great that Dole chose to abandon his seat and position as majority leader of the U.S. Senate. This was done to redefine himself as a citizen and presidential candidate rather than as a member of the Senate and to create more time for campaigning. It is not clear that this strategy worked, however, as the Dole-Jack Kemp ticket was soundly defeated with only 41 percent of the popular vote and less than a third of the electoral vote. Though his senatorial experience surely did not cause his defeat, this story raises the question of whether candidates generally find Senate service a liability in their quests for White House.

Contrary to Dole’s view, the conventional wisdom holds that senators are prime presidential material. The Senate is thought to be “the major launching pad for presidential contenders.”¹ It has been called the “Mother of Presidents,” “presidential incubator,” “the presidential nursery,” and “presidential pre-school.”² Nearly every senator has been considered a potential candidate for president at one time or another simply because of the office he or she occu-


BARRY C. BURDEN is assistant professor of government at Harvard University. He is coauthor of *Why Americans Split Their Tickets: Campaigns, Competition, and Divided Government* and editor of *Uncertainty in American Politics* (both forthcoming).
pies. Some elections have even seen hordes of senators running for president simultaneously. For example, the 1976 contest brought out Senators Henry “Scoop” Jackson, Frank Church, Birch Bayh, Lloyd Bentsen, and Fred Harris, while the 1988 election featured Senators Joseph Biden, Bob Dole, Al Gore, Gary Hart, Ernest “Fritz” Hollings, and Paul Simon. This strong presence would not surprise most scholars and journalists, since they assume that senators are natural candidates for the White House. Among other assets, they have demonstrated campaign experience, are able to raise large sums of money, enjoy wide name recognition, and have already managed to represent large and often diverse state constituencies. In short, senators ought to have a head start over other kinds of candidates when the presidential race begins.

Despite these clear expectations, senators have not often been successful presidential candidates, particularly in the modern nominating era. The failure of senators to meet expectations cannot be explained by a series of unconnected anecdotes; statistical evidence shows that the poor performance of senators is more than coincidence. Before turning to empirical analysis or suggesting explanations, I begin by reanalyzing the historical record to reject the basic contention that senators are ideal presidential candidates. The second section reviews relevant political science theory and considers two specific historical events that might have affected senators’ success rates. The next section develops the notion of candidate investment found in ambition theory and suggests four explanations flowing from it that might explain why governors in particular perform better than senators. Finally, I collect data on all major presidential contenders over the last forty years to determine how career backgrounds in the Senate affect campaign success.

**The Surprising Historical Record**

It is almost unheard of for presidents to come directly from the Senate. Of the forty-three presidents of the United States, only two—Warren Harding in 1920 and John Kennedy in 1960—moved straight from the Senate to the White House. Of the fifty-four presidential elections held since 1789, only fifteen saw current or even former senators win. Limiting the time frame to contemporary elections, some of the worst defeats were suffered by senators who had earned their parties’ nominations. Among others, Senators Barry Goldwater (1964), George McGovern (1972), Walter Mondale (1984), and Bob Dole (1996) lost by embarrassing margins. Of the last seven presidents, only Nixon had senatorial experience, and he had but a partial term as senator.

While this brief history does not prove that senators make poor candidates, it seems clear that senators are not the strong candidates that many expect them to be. There are two nuances to this conclusion that require further exploration,

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however. First, there are probably differences between former and sitting senators. Indeed, many successful presidential candidates—from Martin Van Buren to Harry Truman—are former senators who worked their way to the presidency through the vice-presidency. Thus, the safest path from the Senate to the White House might be indirect. Roughly 142 major-party nominees have run for president, but just forty-four of these were ever in the Senate, most of them earlier in their political careers. Former senators not only make up the lion’s share of this group but also won more often. There is either a liability associated with those who are currently senators or a benefit associated with having left the Senate in the past, perhaps attributable to passing through the vice-presidency first, a sort of back door strategy.

The second refinement to the conclusion is to point out that governors are senators’ main competition. Thus, the story is as much about governors’ successful presidential campaigns as it is about senators’ unsuccessful ones. Over the last thirty years, senators accounted for the largest group of declared presidential candidates but governors were not far behind. Nearly two-thirds of contemporary presidential candidates are drawn either from the Senate or governors’ offices. Longer-range data support this contention too. Table 1 presents data on presidential nominees and the larger pool of presidential “contenders” assembled by Eve Lubalin and separately by Robert L. Peabody, Norman J. Ornstein, and David W. Rohde (hereafter POR) for the period covering 1868 to 1972. Data from both studies are presented to show that results are similar despite their use of slightly different coding procedures. The POR data are further manipulated to compute success rates.


The first column in Table 1 lists the last office held by presidential candidates. This is nearly the same as Joseph Schlesinger’s definition of a “manifest office.” While not an ideal way to characterize candidates’ office-holding histories, it is reasonable shorthand at this point for suggesting from where party candidates are drawn. The Lubalin and POR data roughly agree that governors provide the largest number of major party nominees. Senators and other federal appointees such as cabinet secretaries each comprise about 14 percent of the nominees, while other types of candidates—probably those with military and business backgrounds—are a slightly larger proportion of the pool. For now, note that this low number of senators as nominees is surprising given that senators far outnumber governors and visible executive branch appointees combined.

The fourth column of the table considers all presidential contenders, a larger set of candidates that includes the eventual nominees. Contenders outnumber nominees almost three to one using the POR definition. Among contenders the position of senators changes dramatically. Senators are one of the smallest groups of nominees despite being the largest groups of contenders. Governors, in contrast, tend to be contenders just as often as senators but are much more likely to win nomination.

More interesting for our purposes is the rate at which contenders become nominees. The final column of Table 1 presents the nomination success rate (NSR), computed as the number of nominees divided by the number of contenders. The mean NSR for all contenders is .36, indicating that about one of every three contenders wins nomination. If senators, governors, and other office-holders had equal success rates, all of the entries in the final column would be nearly equal and close to this value. They clearly are not. Aside from House members, who are few in number, the lowest value is for senators. Only three out of every twenty senators who run for the presidency will be nominated. In contrast, nearly half of governors who run for president win their parties’ nominations. Governors’ nomination rate is nearly three times that of senators.

The simple evidence presented so far demonstrates that senators have fared less well than conventional wisdom would suggest. Their failures have opened the door for governors. Despite this clear statistical pattern, it is tempting to explain some recent failures of senators using stories specific to particular elections. For example, one might argue that ex-Senator Dole lost the 1996 presidential election because he was perceived as too old for the job or because his opponent benefited from presiding over a booming economy. Several other senators lost in November because they were thought to be too ideologically extreme (Barry Goldwater in 1964, George McGovern in 1972, and Walter Mondale in 1984). One might argue that former Senator Hubert Humphrey lost in 1968 because of a fluke third-party candidacy, a lack of unity within the

Democratic party, or blame for Lyndon Johnson’s handling of the Vietnam War. One could add stories about numerous other candidacies. While these explanations all have some truth to them, they do not allow one to connect cases to one another in a systematic fashion. Many more complicated stories would have to be told to explain the dozens of senators including tough cases such as Estes Kefauver (1960), Scoop Jackson (1972), Birch Bayh (1976), and John McCain (2000) who failed to earn even their parties’ nominations. While it might be feasible to construct idiosyncratic explanations for each case of senatorial failure over the past 200 years, coincidence is not this powerful. There is something more general about the Senate that connects many of these cases; from a political science perspective it is more useful to understand the rule than the exceptions. To do so, our study should be linked to the rich literature on presidential selection.

**Senators and the Theory of Presidential Selection**

Since the rise of the direct primary as the chief mechanism for choosing presidential candidates, an emerging literature has sought to explain the dynamics of presidential selection. Some excellent studies, beginning with John Aldrich’s early treatment, focus on the sequence of prenomination events. Because primaries and caucuses occur one after another in time, early results affect candidates and voters in later contests. This creates a dynamic process in which momentum and expectations are crucial. With the growing use of direct primaries for selecting convention delegates and the institution of party reforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s, fundraising and early primary wins have become even more important to candidate success. Thus, in contrast to the many studies of general elections, presidential primaries feature more candidates, unpredictability, and strategy on the parts of voters and candidates. The result is a quick winnowing of the field from as many as ten viable contenders to just one nominee per party over the course of just a few months.

Presidential selection is a natural setting in which to apply theories of political ambition. Ambition theory flows from Schlesinger’s classic treatment of the subject, which has shaped all subsequent analyses. The basic idea is that most politicians wish to advance their careers by moving up the hierarchy of political offices. Though some office holders choose to hold a single office their entire careers (static ambition) or remain in office only a few years (discrete ambition), most politicians have progressive ambition: “the politician aspires to at-

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tain an office more important than the one he now seeks or is holding.” Of course, calculating politicians do not blindly seek higher office at every opportunity. Ambition is progressive in the sense that politicians would accept higher office were it offered to them without risk. It is the “political opportunity structure” along with an individual’s risk profile that partly governs moves up the political ladder.

The Senate appears to be a natural stepping-stone in Schlesinger’s view. It is commonly assumed, for example, that nearly all senators have progressive ambition for the presidency and place a uniformly high value on holding the office. Unfortunately, there are real risks associated with running for president, especially losing one’s current office in the pursuit and ending up out of government entirely. The political opportunity structure interacts with ambition in this way. Senators are better able to take advantage of the structure than are other office holders because of their six-year terms. Schlesinger also shows that senators’ careers are the most “orderly” in terms of flowing from office to office up the hierarchy. And the Senate is seen as higher on the ladder of offices than are governorships. In short, ambition theory suggests that the Senate is the ideal “manifest office” for seeking the presidency. Before exploring why this might not always be true, two caveats are in order.

**Historical Milestones**

There are two events that might have changed the success rates of senators seeking the presidency. The first was the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, which in 1913 provided for the direct election of U.S. senators. Direct election changed the Senate, making senators more responsive to and more representative of their constituencies. One might expect that senators became more successful seeking the presidency after the amendment, because they developed through generational replacement into a more electorally oriented breed. There is some empirical support for this hypothesis. After the 1916 election, senators’ share of the contender pool rose from 26 percent to 35 percent, and their presence among nominees grew from 6 percent to 21 percent. Before the 17th Amendment, senators were less likely to pursue presidential bids and less

13 Schlesinger’s finding comes from his analysis of careers in the first half of the twentieth century. I verified this result for a recent year (1999) in which 13 percent of U.S. senators had been governors while only one governor (2 percent) had been a senator.
15 Lubalin, “Presidential Ambition and Senatorial Behavior”; Peabody, Ornstein, and Rohde, “The United States Senator as a Presidential Incubator.”
likely to achieve them if they did run. This had a multiplicative effect that dou-
bly hurt their chances.

The second change occurred when the nomination process was altered in
the 1960s and 1970s. Most notably, the direct primary replaced conventions and
caucuses as the method for choosing nominees. Delegate selection methods,
particularly for Democrats, assured that delegates would be more representa-
tive of the citizenry than before. These reforms could have affected senators’
success rates if senators were uniquely able to take advantage of primaries or
were somehow hindered by the new rules. These reforms culminated in the
McGovern-Fraser Commission recommendations, which encouraged more
democratic selection of delegates to national party conventions. Using the 1972
election as the first in which these reforms defined the nomination process,
there is no evidence that the process affected recruitment from the Senate. In
the era of direct election, the 1972 reforms did not affect the rate at which sena-
tors won their parties’ nominations.

While these historical changes in the presidential selection structure, partic-
ularly direct election, had some effect on senators’ success rates, they are not
responsible for the persistent gap between theoretical expectations and actual
performance. Anecdotes also fail to generate complete accounts for what
seems to be a systematic pattern; they are better explaining deviations from it.
A fuller explanation of candidate performance is required to augment the rich
histories of individual campaigns and candidates.

THE ROLE OF INVESTMENT IN AMBITION THEORY

I seek to augment the traditional approach to studying presidential selection
by emphasizing the notion of candidate investment implied by ambition theory.
This emphasis might be able to explain better the anomalous cases, particularly
those of senators, and might also lead us to rethink the role of risk in progres-
sive ambition. I define investment as the degree to which a candidate commits
to her or his presidential campaign. Note that it is an amount (that is, how in-
vested one is) rather than a dichotomy (that is, invested or not). Investment
matters because presidential campaigns are taxing affairs. They require ex-
traordinary time commitments, extensive organizational resources, daunting
fundraising demands, and thick skins. In short, a presidential campaign requires
huge personal and professional sacrifices with only a modest chance of success.

Intuitively, the idea of investment fits with journalistic accounts suggesting
that particular politicians are “exploring the possibility of a presidential bid” or
“testing the waters” (low investment) or “aggressively seeking the nomination”
(high investment). One can easily imagine a senator toying with a presidential
bid to get attention from the media and gain other kinds of influence.16 That is

16 Hess, The Ultimate Insiders; Lubalin, “Presidential Ambition and Senatorial Behavior.”
the lowest form of investment. In contrast, Dole’s bridge-burning resignation from the Senate in 1996 represents total investment in the presidential campaign.

Senators might fare poorly because they invest less than other candidates, even though their desire for the presidency is just as great. And they might invest less because something inherent in the office depresses their subjective estimates of their chances for success or lowers the costs of a initiating a presidential bid. Such behavior is of course consistent with ambition theory. The theory recognizes that the motivations to invest in a presidential campaign also vary among senators depending on such complex factors as risk profiles and simple things like when their terms end. Compare two senators who face reelection in different years. For one, the presidential election occurs midterm; for the other it coincides with the end of the current term. The midterm senator might casually consider a presidential campaign and then retreat to the safety of his office should it not seem fruitful in the early months. The other senator, however, faces a more consequential choice. She or he might decide to abandon the Senate to campaign for the presidency full-time or conclude that the bid would not be successful and resolve to rerun for the Senate instead with a better chance of success.17

I hypothesize that senators and governors differ in their successes because they invest at different levels. Because their constituencies are the same, many factors are held constant, allowing us to identify Senate-specific variables more confidently. Since senators and governors together account for most of the serious presidential contenders, explaining their relative success rates goes a long way toward explaining presidential nominations in general. I now offer four potential explanations for why senators are not performing as theory would expect, each of which is congruent with the investment idea and the larger theory of ambition. None is sufficient, unfortunately, but each is at least plausible. They deal with authority and the issues, expectations, office structure, and the candidate pool.

Authority and the Issues

Though elected within the same constituencies, a fundamental difference between a senator and a governor is that one is a legislator and the other is an executive. This difference might affect their chances for success and thus their investment levels. Senators make policy and take positions by introducing bills, offering amendments in committee, making speeches, bargaining with their colleagues, and eventually voting on roll calls on the Senate floor. Many of these actions, particularly roll call voting, are concrete, durable, and traceable. Most senators have some issues on which they would prefer not to take clear public stands, perhaps because it would divide their reelection constituencies and pro-

17 Lyndon Johnson (1960) and Orrin Hatch (2000) were permitted by state law to run for senator and president simultaneously.
vide potential opponents with material to use against them in a campaign.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, the relentless flow of votes, usually hundreds each year, requires senators to do so. The agenda is often forced upon them. The skills that aid senators in assembling coalitions and negotiating with colleagues might not serve them well when campaigning for an executive office that demands leadership and decisiveness. A poignant indicator of this problem came after Senator Bob Dole flopped in his first national presidential debate. “If only the debate worked like the Senate, he lamented: ‘If you could go back and edit remarks, like we do in the Senate, I would have changed the wording.’”\textsuperscript{19}

Governors, on the other hand, often get to define their own agendas and might choose to remain ambiguous on sensitive issues. They can find niche issues such as education, campaign reform, taxes, and welfare reform on which they may to ride into office and govern. Sometimes objective state conditions will require them to tackle particular issues, of course, but they will never be forced to go on record on as wide an array of matters as legislators must. Though governors do negotiate with their state legislatures, as executives they have much more control than do senators over policy outcomes. Legislators must negotiate to reach their own goals but also take positions on the compromises that others are negotiating. Senators face a double-edged policy sword. They must equivocate to succeed but rarely are given credit for Congress’s accomplishments. Governors, on the other hand, may often take clearer credit for what has been done.

\textit{Expectations}

Citizens have different expectations of senators and governors. These are of several types. Governors must steer the executive branch bureaucracies on a daily basis while senators address the issues on the national agenda, including such remote affairs as the annual budget process, treaties, and executive branch appointments about which voters know little. Governors might be advantaged because they are expected to act as executives, perhaps the ideal role to play before becoming the nation’s chief executive. Though senators such as Al Gore (2000) sometimes have an advantage in the traditional presidential realm of foreign policy, the conventional view is that “being a governor is like being a president in miniature.”\textsuperscript{20} Senators are required to compromise and negotiate


\textsuperscript{20} Louis Harris, “Why the Odds Are against a Governor’s Becoming President,” \textit{Public Opinion Quarterly} 23 (Fall 1959): 361–370. Former presidential candidate Ross Perot explained just before the 2000 presidential election that George W. Bush benefited from this. Perot explained that “... when you’re a senator, you just pass laws; when you’re a governor, you have to make things work. When you’re president, you have to make things work. George Bush has had the practical experience and demonstrated his ability in being an effective governor and getting results and making things work. Gore has no experience” (NBC’s “Meet the Press,” 5 November 2000).
to be successful legislators, skills that do not necessarily make good presidential candidates.

Governors are also perceived as outsiders compared to senators, many of whom have been in Washington long enough to acquire reputations as Beltway fixtures. Maybe as a result of these differences, survey data show that governors are better known than senators within their home states.\(^{21}\) Unfortunately, this degree of familiarity seems to breed contempt: constituents also view governors less favorably than senators. Further, governors are also less known around the country than are senators.\(^{22}\) Except on federal issues such as welfare reform and the recent tobacco industry settlement, governors are seen as less authoritative on national matters. The Sunday morning talk shows, after all, rely heavily on the Senate for their supply of guest experts.\(^{23}\)

Finally, governors are disadvantaged to the degree that constituents see senators linked more to national affairs. This happens in part because the media create these links, even if implicitly, in their coverage of statewide elected officials.\(^{24}\) Though a senator probably has less responsibility for government in general, he nonetheless spends more time in Washington than does a governor and is associated with issues beyond state borders. Research has found that voters perceive these differences and that they vote more on the basis of national issues in Senate elections and more on the basis of state issues in gubernatorial elections.\(^{25}\)

**Office Structure**

The formal office structures of senators and governors differ in two ways. First, senators have longer terms. Currently governors’ terms are four years in all but two states (where they are even shorter) while senators serve for six years at a stretch. Further, the switch to four-year terms for governors is relatively new; in 1960 sixteen states still had two-year terms. Many governors also face term limitations that senators do not. By state law thirty of the fifty governors must

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\(^{22}\) Harris, “Why the Odds are against a Governor’s Becoming President.”

\(^{23}\) Hess, *The Ultimate Insiders*; Krasno, *Challengers, Competition, and Reelection*.


now limit themselves to just one or two terms. So when a quadrennial presidential election rolls around, many governors’ terms are either ending simultaneously or they know that they are lame ducks who must leave office before the next presidential election.

Only one-third of senators’ terms end when any given president’s does, and there are no legal limits on how long they may serve. As a result, senators whose terms are not up may casually pursue a presidential bid without jeopardizing their status as elected officials. If the campaign does not succeed in the early prenomination period, one may simply abandon it and return to life in Washington. The experience might even be helpful in testing the presidential waters again in the future. Many governors do not have this low-investment luxury.26 When their terms end, most have to pursue another office or return to private life. They must be serious about their presidential campaigns because it is generally all-or-nothing. The degree of investment should be deeper and more uniform for governors than senators, because they have less to lose.

A side effect of serving six-year terms without limit is that senators are probably in office longer than are governors. Winning three senatorial elections puts a politician in Washington for eighteen years, though few governors will remain in office more than four or eight years total by law. So senators should be older than governors, have been in office longer, and, most importantly, have a different view of what makes a successful campaign because of their longevity. The issues and strategies that worked in the first campaign years ago might not appeal to today’s voters as well. Though senators probably invoke similar themes each time they run, mere name recognition, incumbency perquisites, challenger deterrence, and constituent loyalty are what really contribute to reelection. This works in one’s own state, but could fail miserably on the road when campaigning nationwide for convention delegates. One of the benefits of the primary system for parties is that it identifies those candidates who can sell themselves outside of their home states. Governors, who generally have spent less time in government, are “closer” to the voters. Perhaps they are a bit younger too; the themes and tactics they employed to win a few years ago are probably still potent today. This might explain in part why young governors like Jimmy Carter (1976), Bill Clinton (1992), and George W. Bush (2000) succeeded while older Senators Lloyd Bentsen (1988), Scoop Jackson (1980), and Ernest “Fritz” Hollings (1988) did not.

A final point on office structure concerns the organization of staff. Senators have a wealth of staff working for them. They have staff to deal with constituents and interest groups, draft legislation, communicate with other members,

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26 As of the early 1990s, thirty-four states held gubernatorial elections at the presidential midterm. Of these, thirty-one have four-year terms so that governors’ terms do not usually line up with presidents’ terms. A few other states hold gubernatorial elections in odd-numbered years. So term limits and lengths matter more for governors than when their terms begin and end. Many senators, but not many governors, will be midterm during a presidential election and have been in office for at least one full term.
manage committee business, and write speeches. This decentralized staff system works well for legislators but is too fragmented to convert easily into a presidential campaign team. Many of the staff are centered around committees, caucuses, or policies rather than members. Governors are fortunate to have more pyramidal staff structures that serve them directly. Many of these aides were campaign staff who made the transition to governing staff after the initial election. Loyal and centralized, they can easily be converted back into a personal campaign machine that suits a presidential bid. Many governors have lieutenant governors who may tend to daily administrative tasks while they are on the presidential campaign trail. In contrast, sitting senators such as Scoop Jackson (1972) are simply blamed for missing roll call votes in Washington when they campaign nationwide.

The Candidate Pool

Finally, the pool of potential presidential contenders is quite different in both size and quality for senators and governors. If one limits the pool to just those who are in office, it seems that there are twice as many senators as governors available to run. If senators ran and succeeded at the same rate as governors, then there should be twice as many running and twice as many winning. This logic expects that two presidents will have come from the Senate for every one that came from a governorship, making senators’ low success rates even more striking.

But this conclusion neglects two important facts. First, many of the candidates who run for president are former governors or senators. Because sitting senators are especially likely to be chosen as vice-presidential running mates, they often make their way to the presidency indirectly. Consequently, one must consider the larger pool of current and former office-holders. Though collecting data on all living ex-governors and ex-senators would be a daunting task, it is safe to assume that the ratio of former senators to former governors is almost certainly less than the 2:1 ratio for current incumbents. One reason is that governors have shorter terms and many face term limits, so they rotate in and out of office more frequently by law. Governors are also more likely than senators to be defeated. From 1960 to 1992, senators won 84 percent of the time compared to governors’ 74 percent. So turnover among governors is much higher, resulting in a large pool of ex-governors who may seek the presidency. If senators’ and governors’ terms were the same length and retirements occurred at the same rate, so that electoral turnover were all that mattered, it

is clear that ex-governors would outnumber ex-senators quickly. Their shorter terms and term limits accelerate the differing reelection rates.\textsuperscript{29} Because states differ greatly in their size, industrialization, population, wealth, and culture, the governors elected to represent them also differ. Governorships, like state legislatures, vary in their professionalism.\textsuperscript{30} Governors from states such as California and New York are professional, nationally known politicians who are almost immediately considered presidential contenders. Governors from Wyoming and Louisiana are more amateur and parochial, making their presidential bids more challenging. As of 1990, governors’ salaries ranged widely from $35,000 in Arkansas to $130,000 in New York. Resources ranged from a staff of 173 and an airplane and helicopter for travel in Illinois to a staff of seventeen and no state air transportation in Nevada.

In contrast, senators are a less diverse lot despite their constituencies’ differences. Senators from California and Wyoming often have the same amount of influence in Washington and are equally apt to seek the presidency. They all have the same salary and similar resources. In short, the Senate is professionally egalitarian. All else constant, a senator such as Joseph Biden is expected to outperform a governor such as Pierre “Pete” DuPont because they are from the same amateur state (Delaware). In contrast, a senator and governor from a state with a professional government start with more similar resources. Thus, one would expect contenders from the Senate to be from smaller states than contenders who are governors. The small state bias is likely to disadvantage senators in the Electoral College.

Because of greater turnover among governors than senators and differences among the people who serve as governors than senators, the heterogeneity of governors is greater. Part of this comes from the fact that the path to the governor’s mansion is less orderly than the path to the Senate.\textsuperscript{31} The natural variance in governors’ capabilities as politicians means that many of them at the low end of the “quality” distribution are unfit for a presidential campaign but that those at the high end of the distribution are well suited to the task. The distribution of senators’ fitnesses is tighter, resulting in fewer who are complete failures and fewer who are natural presidential nominees.

Finally, there are de facto rules about presidential nominations that effectively restrict who may run. For example, incumbent presidents seeking a second term and vice-presidents trying to run for the presidency for the first time rarely face strong intraparty challenges for their parties’ nominations. In the modern era, no sitting president has been denied the nomination when he

\textsuperscript{29} A simple simulation shows how quickly ex-governors accumulate. Assume a limit of one four-year term for thirty governors and a .75 probability of reelection for the other twenty. Senators have an assumed .85 reelection rate. There are no retirements or deaths. After just six years forty-two of the fifty governors have left office, while only fifteen of the 100 senators have.


\textsuperscript{31} Schlesinger, \textit{Ambition and Politics}.
sought it. This thwarts the aspirations of those in the president’s party who would like to make a run for higher office. For example, as a strong candidate for reelection in 1984, President Ronald Reagan faced no real opposition for the Republican nomination. This had the effect of removing all Republican senators, governors, and other notables from running that year. So the Senate’s 100 members were not given an equal opportunity to run. Any of fifty-four Republicans in the majority who wished to run probably deferred because of Reagan’s presence. Thus, the operative pool of current senators who could credibly run for president in 1984 was at most forty-six, the number of Democrats at the time. As a result, nine Democrats became contenders, six of them with senatorial experience. In general, the greater the number of offices held by the president’s party, the smaller the pool of candidates available to run for the opposing party’s nomination. From 1960 to 1996, the size of the outparty pool—those senators and governors not from the president’s party—averages around seventy-seven individuals. This pool could be reduced further by eliminating those who do not meet the legal requirements (age 35, natural born citizen, and fourteen-year resident) or common demographic requirements such as being male, white, and Christian.32

**Presidential Contender Data**

Before considering these hypotheses empirically, one must decide upon a particular stage of the selection process to study. I have chosen to observe candidates who seriously pursued a presidential bid. Following others, I label these candidates presidential “contenders.” They are people who chose to move beyond just being considered potential candidates by actually initiating their candidacies. My operational definition of a contender is any presidential candidate who officially declares her or his candidacy and runs in at least one primary outside of his home state (to avoid the idiosyncratic “favorite son” phenomenon).33 These criteria are a reasonable compromise between analyzing the thousands of possible candidates and studying only party nominees.

The choice is not without consequences, but it seems to capture an important point at which candidacies become failures or successes during the prenomination phase. I have further limited the focus to the modern nomination era for sake of comparability. The rise of television as a campaign medium and the direct primary fundamentally changed the structure of the nomination process. Consequently, the data set includes those presidential contenders who sought their parties’ nomination in the ten presidential elections from 1960 to 1996. This results in a total of 139 contenders from both parties, twenty of whom won major party nomination.

32 For example, see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, “Progressive Ambition among United States Senators, 1972–1988.”

33 The data set also excludes second tier candidates who earned no more than 1 percent of the vote in a primary outside of their home states.
TABLE 2

<table>
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<th>Last Office Held</th>
<th>Contenders (%)</th>
<th>Nominees (%)</th>
<th>Winners (%)</th>
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<th>VSR</th>
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<td>28.6</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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<td>.57</td>
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<td>28.6</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.33</td>
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<td>Federal Appointee</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Person</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting Senators</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Senators</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never in Senate</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Nomination Success Rate = Nominees/Contenders

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| | | | | | |

I have recorded the most recent office or other position held by each of the presidential contenders as was done in Table 1 by Lubalin and Peabody, Ornstein, and Rohde. I repeat their analysis in Table 2 using a slightly different coding of offices held. I include categories for business people such as Steve Forbes (1996) and activists/celebrities such as Jesse Jackson (1988) and Pat Buchanan (1992 and 1996). As one might expect, senators make up the largest grouping at more than one-third of all contenders. Governors are not far behind at 23 percent. Aside from House members, no other office comprises more than a tenth of the total pool.

In addition to the many contenders whose most recent position was in the Senate, eight other candidates had been in the Senate at some point in their past; all eight were later chosen president or vice president. To account for all possible paths from the Senate to the White House, I coded whether they had ever been in the Senate and, for current senators, whether the ends of their terms coincided with the presidential election or not.

I rely on two rough measures of success. The nomination success rate (NSR) is computed as before. The final column also shows the victory success rate (VSR), which is the ratio of general election winners to contenders. Aside from those candidates with backgrounds in the House, bureaucracy, or private sector who were never nominated by their parties, senators have the lowest success rates, which most importantly are below those of governors. Governors do 30 percent better at winning nomination (.13/.10) and three times as well at winning the general election.

The lower half of the table considers the candidates in terms of Senate experience alone to examine how current and former senators differ. This part of the table shows how senatorial experience anywhere in one’s background affects success. The percentage of senators in the pool now grows to 43 percent,
since any contender who ever served in the Senate is counted. Remarkable here is that only about one in ten candidates was a former senator when running for president, yet these few contenders performed best, winning nomination almost half of the time and election a quarter of the time. In contrast, current senators and those without Senate experience do poorly. One would suppose that current senators invest less in their campaigns than do former senators, as the theory offered here expects. This finding is especially striking because those without much relevant experience—representatives, celebrities, and bureaucrats—win the general election four times as often as current senators do.

These data clarify the role of the Senate for us. It is only those candidates with current Senate attachments who underperform as presidential contenders. Former senators do as theory would expect, but their success is often due to running from the vice-presidency rather than any direct advantage provided by their time in the Senate.

This discussion recalls the basic causal argument underlying studies of presidential selection: background experiences shape candidate success. Though a full account of the factors that affect candidate performance is beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to consider briefly whether senators differ from other contenders on some relevant dimensions. Success, of course, may be measured in many ways. Above I measured it using the NSR and VSR. Here I expand the operational definition of success to several continuous measures as well—percentage of primary votes for a candidate, percentage of the party convention vote for a candidate, and number of convention delegates won.

I begin with simple demographic data for the 139 contenders in my sample: their ages and whether they meet the traditional presidential pattern of being white, male, and Christian. Jews, blacks, and women are thought to be disadvantaged in the process, as are older candidates. Because candidates must win a majority in the Electoral College to be elected, geographic considerations are important too. I determined whether candidates were from the South or not and how many electoral votes their home states were allotted. At least in the post-civil rights era, being from the South is an advantage, evidenced by the fact that five of the seven presidents elected after JFK were southerners. Being the favorite son from a state that carries a lot of electoral clout is beneficial too; all but three of the twenty-two major party presidential nominees since 1960 have won their home states. Finally, two variables capture the visibility or viability of candidates. The first is whether a contender ran before or not, assuming that an initial failure may lead to success later as it did for Reagan, Nixon, and the senior George Bush. Second is a measure of the candidates’ ideological positions. One might expect that those associated with extreme policy proposals are disadvantaged in the general election, though they may be favored during the nomination when they seek approval from party activists. I use the absolute value of NOMINATE scores to assess ideological extremity, which exists for most of

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34 See Aldrich, Before the Convention.
the contenders. (See Appendix.) This variable gives one a rough sense of the ideological appeal of the candidate to primary and general election voters. Details about the operations of all of the variables may be found in the Appendix.

None of the variables is ideal, nor are they an exhaustive accounting of the factors that determine presidential candidate performance. While not tapping directly the peculiarities of being in the Senate, each gets at investment differences among candidates indirectly by assessing their chances for success in much the same way that donors, activists, voters, or candidates themselves might.

**Analysis of Contenders**

Table 3 presents mean values for six of the variables by last office held and Senate background of the 139 presidential contenders. The first data column reports the mean number of electoral votes for the states from which candidates run. There are two notable findings here. First, as one would expect, contenders are disproportionately from large-population states. The average state has 10.8 electoral votes but the typical contender brings 18.8 votes to the campaign ($p < .001$). More importantly, senators have the lowest number of electoral votes of the seven types of contenders in the data set. On average they bring to the election ten fewer electoral votes than governors, even though they share the same constituencies. Though there are counterexamples, senators running for president such as Bob Dole, George McGovern, and Ed Muskie are often from small states while governors like Jerry Brown, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Nelson Rockefeller hail from larger states. This finding is consistent with the candidate pool explanation provided above. Because governors are a heterogeneous bunch, only the best will make serious runs for the presidency, and they tend to be from the largest states with the most professional governments. Senators are more homogeneous, so state size matters less in their political calcula-
tions. Since electoral votes and general election victories are correlated ($r = .22$), the lack of diversity hurts senators as a group.

Senators are also older than governors by a couple of years. While not universal, there are plenty of young governors such as Clinton and George Wallace and older senators such as Alan Cranston and Dole who have run. This modest difference is at least consistent with the office structure argument offered above. Senators have been in office longer because of their six-year terms and because senators tend to hold more lower offices than governors on their way up the political ladder. The data are also surprising in terms of overrepresentation of the South. Southern states comprise only 22 percent of the Union and thus of current senators and governors. Even in terms of the Electoral College, southern states were just 24 percent of the total in 1960 and rose to only 27 percent in 1996. However, the South’s influence grows the further one moves along the path from candidacy (30 percent) to nomination (33 percent) to victory (50 percent). The fact that the South plays a disproportionately large role in national politics is not surprising. A new implication is that senators’ low success rates as contenders stem in part from their nonsouthern bases. If the U.S. electoral system and voters’ preferences favor candidates like Johnson, Carter, and Clinton from below the Mason-Dixon line, then the many senators who choose to run for president despite being from somewhere else have a clear liability.

These findings should not imply that senators are always disadvantaged by their backgrounds. They do not appear more ideologically extreme than other contenders, for example. In terms of race, religion, and gender, senators are actually advantaged because they are more likely to fit the traditional pattern than are other candidates. Only 8 percent are not white, male, or Christian, while nearly one-fifth of governors and other contenders do not conform with these historical precedents. Finally, senators are no more reluctant than governors to give a presidential campaign another shot following a failure.

In summary, this simple analysis has shown at least four ways in which contenders from the Senate differ from governors and other contenders. Senators are often hindered because they are older, hail from states with fewer electoral votes, and are less likely to be from the South than are other candidates. To their advantage, they are more likely to fit the traditional white, male, and Christian description of American presidents, though the frequency of these characteristics varies widely across contender types.

To be certain that these inferences are correct, we need to consider more carefully what it means to be a candidate from the Senate. A contender could be a current senator, former senator, or without Senate experience when she or he pursues the presidency. Table 2 showed that former senators performed

35 Schlesinger, *Ambition and Politics*.

better than expected, while current members and those who never served in
the Senate seldom won nomination and were even less likely to win the elec-
tion. The bottom half of Table 3 shows mean values of each of the six variables
by Senate background to explore whether differences in success are attribut-
able to other candidate characteristics.

We now find that the differences between senators and other contenders
are really due to differences between sitting senators and others. Former sena-
tors do not face as large an Electoral College shortfall, nor, surprisingly, are
they as old as current senators. They benefit from having the right demographic
profiles and experience from previous presidential campaigns. Their only liabil-
ities appear to be having less connection to the South and more ideological di-
versity than sitting senators.

**Senate Backgrounds and Candidate Success**

These findings, largely but not completely, conform with theoretical expecta-
tions. Senators are favored and hindered in different ways depending on
whether they are current or former members and how their terms line up with
presidential elections. Most of the differences are limited to sitting senators,
since former senators look like other non-Senate contenders. Though I have
theoretical reasons for how the six variables relate to success, I do not yet know
how much weight each of them is given during the nomination and general cam-
paigns. For example, being from the South may be helpful and being older
might be harmful, but which effect is greater?

I attempt to address these kinds of questions in Table 4. For each of four
Senate statuses, the table presents four sequential measures of candidate suc-
cess. Two are continuous and occur early in the process (percentage of all pri-
mary votes and percentage of party convention votes) while the other two are
dichotomous and operationalize later outcomes (nomination and election).
Further, success is considered in light of where a current senator’s term stands.
Taking advantage of the staggered cycle of Senate elections gives one leverage
on the investment component of ambition theory by further differentiating cur-
rent senators according to how much they must commit to a presidential campaign. Senators whose terms end in the presidential election year must often choose to focus on either the presidential or senatorial campaign, while midterm senators are free to pursue presidential nominations without jeopardizing their seats.

Clearly the most successful contenders are former senators. Since eight of twelve were actually running for the vice presidency or presidency when observed, this is not as surprising as it might seem at first. Sitting senators are much less successful than former senators according to all four criteria. More importantly, sitting senators also appear to be less successful than those who were never in the Senate. This implies that the key variable is not Senate experience per se, but being in the Senate while running for president. It does not seem that legislators necessarily have a more difficult time than other contenders because of the positions they take on roll calls, the negotiating and compromising they do with other members, or the lack of credit they can take for government accomplishments. This result challenges the “authority and the issues” and to a lesser degree the “expectations” explanations offered above. Sitting members of the Senate, only two of whom ever were elected president, do the most poorly. Despite his eventual defeat, in retrospect it seems wise of Bob Dole to have resigned his Senate seat in the summer of 1996 to pursue of campaign full time.

A final point should be made about current senators. Contrary to what the investment idea implies, senators whose terms are up do a bit worse than those who are in the middle of their terms. I expected that these candidates would commit more seriously to the campaign than those who are entertaining the ideal without real risk. But there is another explanation that still fits with the ideas of investment and progressive ambition. Senators whose terms expire in the year in which they want to run for president must decide early in the election which office they will devote themselves to full-time. Senator Phil Gramm (1996) was one of many presidential candidates whose term happened to expire in the year he was running. He quickly realized that his presidential campaign was failing and withdrew before the New Hampshire primary occurred so that he could focus on winning reelection to the Senate. Today he remains a senator with the opportunity to run for president again. Senators Dole (1980), Hollings (1984), and Bentsen (1988) made similar moves by choosing not to invest heavily in presidential bids at the time their Senate seats could have been taken away. In contrast, senators who are midterm when the presidential election rolls around may campaign aggressively without fear of losing their place in Congress. Though not all candidacies fit the pattern, John Kennedy (1960), Robert Kennedy (1968), and George McGovern (1972) are just three of the many senators who had the luxury of heavy investment without much risk—an ideal situation.
Conclusion

Contrary to the conventional wisdom found in newspaper stories and academic journals, senators have been poorer presidential candidates than one might expect. Many of them have run for president, but surprisingly few have earned their parties’ nominations and even fewer have won the general election. Former senators do well, though much of their success is attributed to being selected as vice-presidential running mates. The group of presidential candidates most analogous to senators—governors—make up the second largest share of the contender pool and perform better than senators when they run. Though senators are probably at least as likely as governors to harbor progressive ambition for the presidency, I argue that their differing success rates are due in part to deeper campaign investment by the typical governor. Governors also benefit from more careful self-selection, with those from larger states, especially in the South, more likely to run. It seems evident that senators, especially sitting senators, have not done as well at the nomination and general election stages as they should have, given what we know. The Senate has seldom been the presidential incubator or nursery it ought to be given the ambition, visibility, resources, and records of both current and former members of the institution.

Of the four general explanations offered for the gap between expectations and performance, some have received more support than others. The “authority and the issues” and “expectations” arguments seem the least potent. There are at least two reasons to be skeptical of these. First, all members of Congress do not perform equally well. Representatives and senators do have similar success rates in the long run, but members of the House differ significantly from senators on several predictors of success. Cabinet officials, business people, activists, and mayors have done about as well too, so there does not appear to be a liability unique to legislators. Representatives should be less successful than senators, since their constituencies are smaller. They serve in a chamber of 435 rather than 100 and have generally spent less time climbing the hierarchy of offices to get where they are. Second, current senators are less successful than former senators. If there is a congressional aura that hurts legislators when they run for president, it does not extend to members who have left Capitol Hill.

I am more optimistic about the “office structure” and “candidate pool” arguments. They have clear connections to the investment and ambition theory and garner tentative support in the rudimentary analysis done here. They explain why the pools of senators and governors are not quite the sizes that we assumed if former office-holders are included. Both arguments also rely on notions of supply and demand and strategic decision making by elites, two crucial elements of any study of presidential selection. Mysteries about ascension of particular candidates to the White House remain of course, but revealing new facts and proposing explanations for them that are tied to theory have proved useful.*

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago. Thanks go to Cecil Eubanks, DuBose Kapeluck, and especially Phil
Operational Definitions of Variables:

Electoral Votes: Number of electoral votes for state from which the candidate hails.
Age: Age on general election day of the year in which candidate runs.
South: Candidate from one of the eleven states in the Confederacy.
Ideological Extremity: Absolute value of NOMINATE scores computed by Keith Poole.37
Minority: Candidate was non-Christian (that is, Jewish), noncaucasian, or female.
Previously Ran: Met the definition of a contender at least once in the past, even if before 1960.
Percent of Primary Vote: Percentage all presidential primary votes earned by the candidate.
Percent of Convention Vote: Percentage of nomination votes on final party convention ballot.

Data Sources:


Paolino for their comments and Kimberly Allen, DuBose Kapeluck, and Matt Savrock for their research assistance.

37 Keith T. Poole, “Recovering a Basic Space from a Set of Issue Scales,” American Journal of Political Science 42 (July 1998): 954–993. NOMINATE is a scaling method based on analysis of roll call votes taken by members of Congress. For presidents who did not serve in Congress, it is based on their announced positions on bills before the legislature.