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Shaking the Tin Cup: Celebrity Candidate Fundraising in American Elections

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Abstract

The literature on celebrity politics often asserts that celebrity politicians are good at fundraising. They are wealthy people in wealthy social networks, and this should give them a fundraising advantage compared to their non-celebrity opponents. Yet, this hypothesis has never been tested. Using fundraising data from 1964 to 2022, this study finds that celebrity candidates are typically not able to out-fundraise their opponents. Yet they perform remarkably well despite this disadvantage. Celebrities tend to win elections when they raise more money than their opponents, run in open-seat contests or in local elections. They tend to lose elections when they lose the fundraising battle, challenge incumbents, or seek federal offices.

Key words: celebrity politics; political amateurs; campaign fundraising

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Introduction

Donald Trump was able to win the 2016 presidential election despite raising far less than his opponent Hillary Clinton. He was able to overcome his fundraising disadvantage in part because of the tremendous amount of free media attention he received. He received nearly \$6 billion worth of earned media compared to Clinton's less than \$3 billion worth (Sultan 2017). His outrageous statements infuriated Democratic activists and his campaign became a political spectacle marked by lies, exaggerations, boasts, offenses, and pomposity that hadn't been seen in modern presidential elections. The outlandishness made him the center of attention and became a type of free campaign advertising.

Trump left his nationally broadcast television show, *The Apprentice*, to run for political office. In 2022, Mehmet Oz ended *The Dr. Oz Show* to run for the US Senate in Pennsylvania. They weren't the first celebrities to run for public office in the US. Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sonny Bono, Al Franken, and many others used their fame for political pursuits. Some have won, others have lost, but their impact on American politics has been tremendous.

Scholars have written about the intermingling of politics and entertainment (Marshall 1997; Street 2001; West and Orman 2003; Corner and Pels 2003; Drake and Higgins 2006, Street 2012; Wheeler 2013; Stanley 2014; Turner 2014; Wright 2019; Majic, O'Neill, and Bernhard 2020). Famous celebrities sometimes advocate for favored causes. Occasionally, a celebrity will seek public office. In other instances, politicians become celebrities after retiring from their elected positions. Skill in front of cameras and audiences and the willingness to be in the media spotlight unite celebrities and politicians. The two professions have much in common with each other.

Celebrities often have experience fundraising for charitable causes and are sought-after donors to political campaigns (Wheeler 2013; Stanley 2014). Some scholars have asserted that celebrities can use their fame to raise money for their own campaigns.

Typically, they either are rich or have access to wealthy people willing to support their cause. It is easier to attract press coverage and convince fans to attend their fund-raisers. Donors love to associate with entertainers they have seen on television or in movies, or sports stars who have high visibility..... In an era where politics is expensive and cash is king, celebrities bring distinctive advantages to the task of political fund-raising. They have high voter recognition, favorable public images, access to financial resources, and the ability to attract positive press coverage.... Hollywood and sporting stars today are adept at raising money and cultivating public attention. (West and Orman 2003, 36-7)

Their fans are potential donors, “The public is exceedingly interested in meeting celebrities. They travel to see them, buy their products, and pay to watch them perform. This gives celebrities a natural fundraising advantage over traditional politicians” (Wright 2019). In addition, celebrities are wealthy people who associate with other wealthy people professionally. Their top tier social network should be an advantage to them should they seek public office. They could use their high-profile contact list to solicit campaign contributions.

Longoria’s (2022a) qualitative study found that celebrities do receive campaign contributions from their celebrity friends. Ronald Reagan received donations from famous Republicans Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Stewart, Charlton Heston, Clint Eastwood, and others. Al Franken received donations from famous Democrats Dan Aykroyd, Larry David, Bill Maher, Tom Hanks, Barbra Streisand, and others. However, the small number of cases didn’t suggest that celebrities were raising more money than their opponents. Trump and Oz, two of the most recent high-profile celebrities to seek office, both raised less than their opponents. The same is true for Jesse Ventura. Ventura relied on public financing and was far outspent by his opponents when he won the gubernatorial election in Minnesota in 1998.

Knecht and Rosentrater's (2021) quantitative study found that celebrity candidates won 67% of the races they ran in. Wright's (2019) analysis found that 58% of celebrities win their races. These are very high winning percentages. Are celebrity candidates winning despite unimpressive fundraising totals?

The data collected for this analysis found that celebrities were able to raise more money than their opponents in only 32% of the races they ran in. Yet, fundraising remained crucial to their electoral prospects. They won a paltry 17% of the races in which they lost the fundraising battle. They won 69% of the races when they won the fundraising battle. When challenging an incumbent, celebrity candidates were able to win the fundraising contest only 21% of the time. In an open seat election, they won the fundraising contest 48% of the time. This is much better but close to a 50/50 split. Celebrities are not especially skilled at fundraising in their first attempts for public office.

With regard to the winning percentages of celebrity candidates the evidence is mixed. They have very high winning percentages in local elections, in open seat contests, and against other amateurs. This is consistent with Knecht and Rosentrater's (2021) and Wright's (2019) previous work. However, they have very low winning percentages in federal elections, when they challenge an incumbent, or when they run against experienced politicians. There are situations where celebrity candidates perform very badly.

Background

Canon (1990) makes a distinction between three different types of amateur candidates. Ambitious amateurs behave strategically like their more experienced counterparts. Policy amateurs are driven by strong ideological convictions. Hopeless amateurs are those that are unlikely to win but are sometimes swept into office during wave elections where their party ID is enough to propel them to victory. Canon defines an amateur as someone who has not previously held elected office. Therefore, this study looks at celebrities in their first attempt to seek public office to remain consistent with Canon's criteria.

Canon (1990) makes an exception for celebrities such as business leaders, TV news anchors, actors, athletes, and astronauts. Because they have much higher levels of name recognition, they should fare

better than unknown candidates. Furthermore, their career success means that politics isn't necessarily done for the purpose of earning a paycheck. They have the freedom to be more selective about which races they enter. Simply put, the opportunity cost is greater for celebrity candidates. This makes them more like ambitious amateurs than hopeless amateurs. Celebrities can behave strategically when selecting the offices they seek.

This type of strategic behavior improves the chances of winning. Lazarus (2008) found that experienced politicians perform better in part because they are more selective about the offices they seek. They are more likely to seek offices only when there is a good probability of winning. Canon argues that celebrities mimic the strategic behavior of experienced politicians,

Those who have had great success in one career are not likely to subject themselves to potential humiliation "for the good of the party" as sacrificial lambs. They are likely to run only when there is a reasonable chance of success, as are their politically experienced counterparts. In this sense, celebrity status plays the same function as the base office for a career politician: a resource for gaining higher office and a stake that is not casually risked. (Canon 1990, 89)

The percentage of amateurs elected decreases as the level of office increases. Most amateurs are concentrated in local offices like city councils and county boards. Fewer are elected to state representative or US House offices. The smallest percentage are elected to statewide seats such as governor or US Senator (Canon 1990). Perhaps it is possible that celebrity candidates can use their fame to skip the traditional steppingstone of local offices and win higher level offices on their first try.

Candidate quality is measured by "name recognition, fundraising networks, and campaign skills" (Squire 1995). Because some amateur candidates are better than others (Roberds and Roberts 2002), it makes sense to take a closer look at celebrity candidates. Celebrities have name recognition and potential fundraising networks, they should be in a better position than non-celebrities should they seek elected offices. Prior research has shown that success in fundraising helps amateur candidates win elections

(Porter and Steelman 2023). Canon states, “Celebrity candidates have name recognition that rivals that of their incumbent opponents, which contributes to their ability to run effective, well-financed campaigns” (1990, 52). Yet, this claim that celebrities raise more money isn’t tested. Yes, they are very well known and yes, they get tremendous amounts of media attention, but do they actually raise more money than their non-celebrity opponents?

There is a direct linear relationship between campaign spending and vote share. The more a candidate spends the more votes they get (Ferguson, Jorgensen, and Chen 2016). Importantly, it is the incumbent who raises more money than a challenger most of the time (Jacobson 1980; Squire 1995). PACs have a strong tendency to donate to incumbents. They do this because their goal is to influence policy by currying favor with current elected officials (Fourinaies and Hall 2014). This leads to the very simple conclusion that money seems to buy elections and preserve the status quo by making it difficult to hold incumbents accountable (Maisel 2019).

Money is especially important for challengers because they need to pay for advertising to increase their name recognition and to pay for professional staff with the necessary skills (Herrnson 1992). It has been found that vote share for incumbents decreases with more spending because incumbents spend more when fighting off a strong challenger (Jacobson 1985). This does not mean that incumbent spending is irrelevant. After accounting for some methodological problems Green and Krasno (1988) found that incumbent spending levels do impact their vote share.

Incumbent advantage is a well-documented phenomenon in political science that extends to all levels of government (Erikson 1971; Trounstine 2011). In the second half of the 20th century incumbent advantage had grown for both federal and state offices (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002). Although there is some evidence to suggest it has declined in recent years because of hyper-partisanship and because voters are placing less value on political experience (Jacobson 2015; Porter and Treul 2023).

The incumbent advantage occurs for many reasons. The first is name recognition (Stokes and Miller 1966; Abramowitz 1975). According to Campbell, "Because incumbents have opportunities to advertise themselves to their constituencies while performing their official duties, they are supposed to hold a significant recognition advantage over challengers. The typical challenger, on the other hand, lacks the resources of office (e.g., media exposure, speaking engagements, district newsletters, etc.) and must fight to win the attention of a preoccupied public" (Campbell 1983). An interesting question then is whether the name recognition associated with celebrity fame can offset this incumbent advantage.

The second reason is that incumbents can perform tasks that constituents like and increase their popularity. They can engage in casework and serve on committees that advance the interests of their constituents (Bullock 1972; Fiorina 1977). A third reason has to do with candidate quality (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). Higher quality candidates are more likely to get elected in the first place. This means the office holder is likely to be a very good politician (Zaller 1998). There is also a deterrence effect (Canon 1990). High quality candidates avoid running against incumbents thus making it more likely the incumbent will cruise to victory, "fewer than one-fifth of challenged incumbents faced an opponent with elective experience" (Canon 1990, 77). Importantly, this quality based incumbent advantage increases for higher visibility offices (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008).

Hypothesis

The literature on celebrity politicians asserts that celebrities use their high status to help them raise campaign money. The claim is that celebrities are wealthy people with wealthy friends, and this gives them a fundraising advantage because they can draw on their social network for contributions.

Additionally, campaign donors may be more likely to take a call from a celebrity than an unknown candidate thus increasing the odds that a celebrity can make a successful request. Finally, celebrities are often asked by charitable organizations to lend their name and talent to help the charity raise money.

These factors should give celebrities a fundraising advantage. It is a logical supposition, yet it has never been empirically tested.

Another question has to do with which factors help a celebrity win and which factors contribute to celebrities losing elections. Besides fundraising, does the level of experience of the opponent make a difference? Or perhaps, does the level of the office, federal, state, or local, impact the win rate of celebrity candidates? Because some celebrity candidates win, while others lose, it is important to determine which factors lead to success.

Methodology

This paper employs simple descriptive statistics and crosstabulations. This method was chosen, firstly, because of the relatively small number of cases. Celebrities are a very select group of people, there aren't very many of them in the population. Historically, very few celebrities have sought elected office. The small number of cases limits the types of data analysis that is methodologically fruitful. Secondly, when answering basic questions about the political behavior of celebrities, descriptive statistics are sufficient. While methodologically sophisticated techniques are prevalent in the social sciences, we risk losing sight of the importance of basic foundational research. Descriptive statistics answer basic questions that are the building blocks for further research. They are easy for the non-specialist to understand and provide exactly the type of information that answers basic questions about the political world (Pérez-Vicente and Ruiz 2009; Procheş 2016; Murphy 2021).

The list of celebrities used for this analysis comes from two sources. Knecht and Rosentrater's (2021) study and Wright's (2019) study. It includes entertainers, athletes, and astronauts who have sought elected office in the United States. People in these professions capture the public imagination. They are hailed as heroes when they succeed. They become role models and are popular because they are aspirational figures. This popularity should help them in their attempts to win public office.

The list of celebrity candidates used in this study added a small number of celebrities that were overlooked by Knecht and Rosentrater and by Wright, or by one and not the other. The list also added celebrity candidates from the most recent election cycles to make it more up to date. In addition, the list includes candidates who dropped out and candidates who ran “joke campaigns.” Candidates such as Stacy Dash, Roseanne Barr, Joseph “Joe Exotic” Maldonado-Passage, Gary Coleman, Kanye West, and Caitlyn Jenner received several thousand votes when they ran. Leaving them out because they are “not serious” is methodologically problematic. These are real candidates who performed very badly. When attempting to figure out celebrity candidate performance it makes little sense to leave out the poor performers.

The list used in this study is the most accurate comprehensive list of celebrity candidates to date, although there remains the possibility that a few lesser-known celebrity candidates may have been overlooked. The author is confident, however, that all the top tier celebrity candidates and nearly every middling and lower-tier celebrity candidate has been included in this newly updated list.

The fundraising data was collected from the Federal Election Commission (FEC), state election authorities, and historical newspapers. The FEC and state election authorities have searchable databases that allow for easy collection of fundraising information for specific candidates. The FEC data goes as far back as 1976. The ease of use for state level databases varies greatly, but they were typically most effective for collecting data from the previous 20 years. For fundraising information not available through the FEC or state-level election authorities Newspapers.com was an effective resource. Political reporters often report on fundraising figures for candidates. Using the historical record archived newspapers provided data on candidate fundraising beyond what the searchable fundraising databases allowed for. Data was collected for the years 1964 to 2022.

This data is from their first attempt at seeking public office and does not include their subsequent attempts, if any. Research has shown that candidates are more successful in subsequent elections due to

their gaining of skills from earlier attempts (Haime, Vallejo, and Schwindt-Bayer 2022). This means they are no longer inexperienced amateurs. If a celebrity wins an election and becomes an office holder, they also no longer fit into the category of “amateur candidate” under the Canon (1990) schema of classifying candidates.

Results

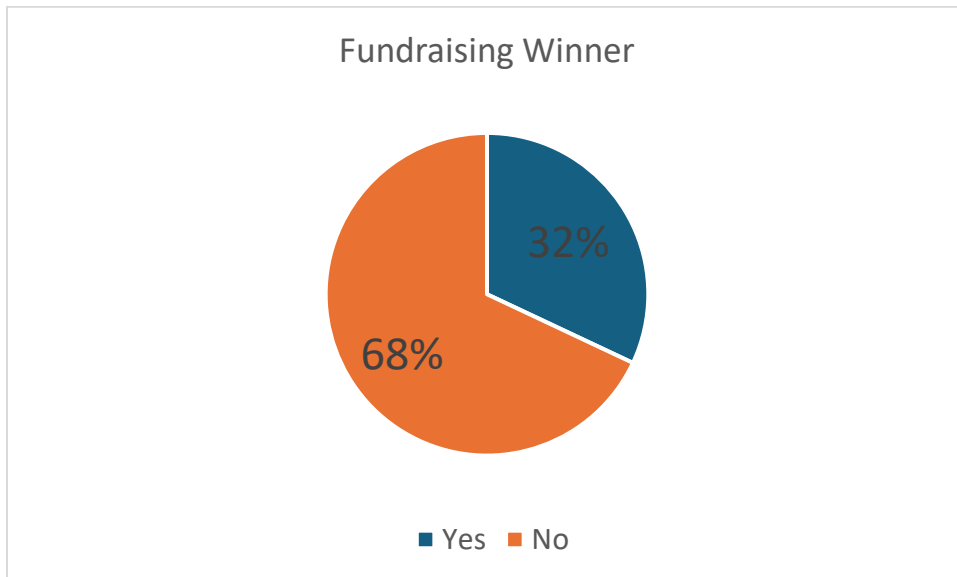
There were 169 contests considered for this study. Of those 67 (40%) were federal elections, 51 (30%) were state elections, and 51 (30%) were local elections. There were 81 (48%) open seat contests in which the celebrity was not facing an incumbent, 76 (45%) races in which the celebrity challenged an incumbent, and 11 (7%) in which the celebrity ran in a recall election. In their first attempt at seeking elected office celebrity candidates won 71 (42%) of their contests and lost 98 (58%) contests. They were able to win with a majority of the votes in 58 (35%) of their races.

Celebrity candidates won 60% of the open seat contests and 26% of the races in which they tried to unseat an incumbent. Celebrities won 28% of the federal elections, 43% of the state elections, and 59% of the local elections. Of the eleven celebrity candidates who ran in a recall election only one, Arnold Schwarzenegger, was successful.

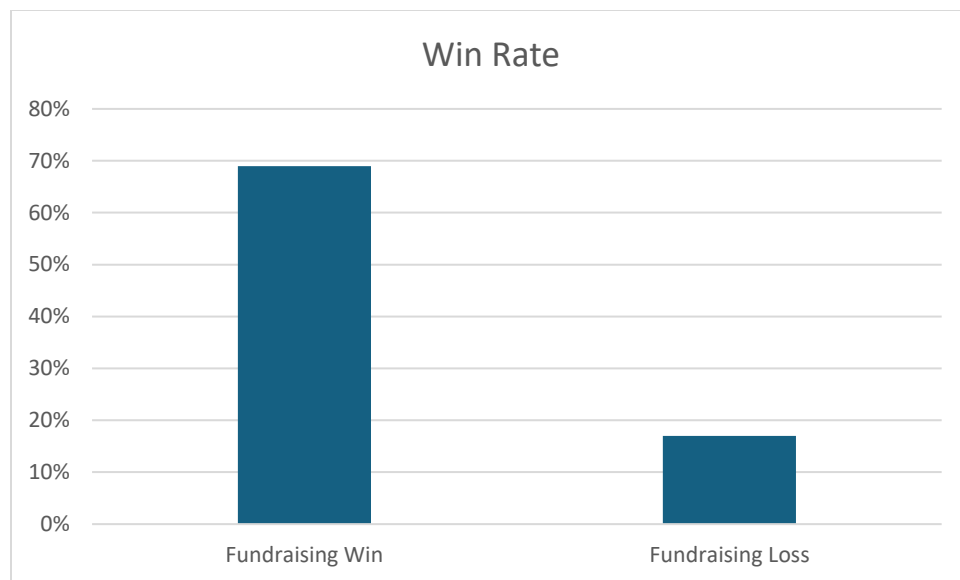
All incumbents are experienced politicians but when a celebrity runs in an open seat contest, they can face either an experienced politician or another amateur. In their first attempt at seeking office celebrities ran against experienced politicians in 71% of the contests. Celebrities mostly lose against experienced politicians, winning only 28% of the time. Against other amateurs, celebrities win 67% of the time. Some celebrity occupations were more successful than others. Entertainers won 29% of their contests, athletes 57%, and astronauts 20%.

These results count wins as winning elected office, but we also need to consider primary elections. In elections with a primary it takes two wins to win the office, but only one loss to lose. There were a total of 99 primary election contests. Local elections are non-partisan, some candidates skip a primary and

run as Independents or 3rd party candidates in a general election, and in recall elections there is no primary. In “jungle primaries” all parties appear on one ballot and a 2nd place showing is considered a win because it moves the candidate on to the general. The data show that celebrity candidates win 73% of their primary contests. Of the 72 primary winners 40 (56%) won the general election.



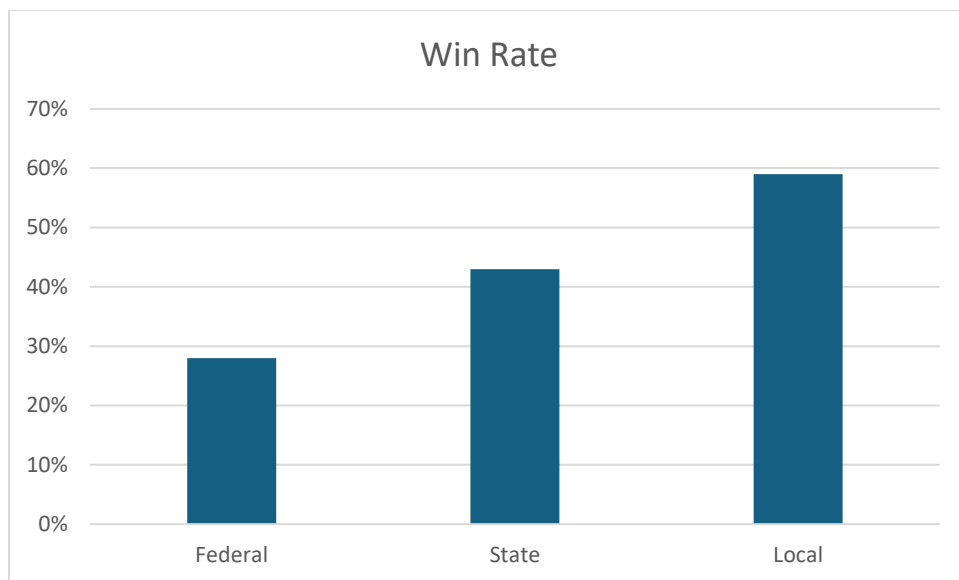
There were 139 races in which fundraising data was available. As displayed in Figure 1, celebrities were able to raise more money than their opponents in 45 (32%) of their races and lost the fundraising battle in 94 (68%) of the contests. As displayed in Figure 2, celebrity candidates won 17% of the races when their opponent raised more than them. They won 69% of the races where they were the fundraising winner. Celebrities were able to raise more money than incumbents in only 21% of races in which they tried to unseat an incumbent office holder. They were the fundraising winner in 48% of the open seat contests. Against experienced opponents, celebrities were the fundraising winner 28% of the time, but against amateur opponents, celebrities were the fundraising winner 46% of the time. They were the fundraising winner in 22% of the federal elections, 38% of the state elections, and 45% of the local elections. Of the eleven celebrities in recall elections only Arnold Schwarzenegger was a fundraising winner. Entertainers won the fundraising battle 22% of the time, while athletes were fundraising winners 47% of the time. No astronaut was a fundraising winner.



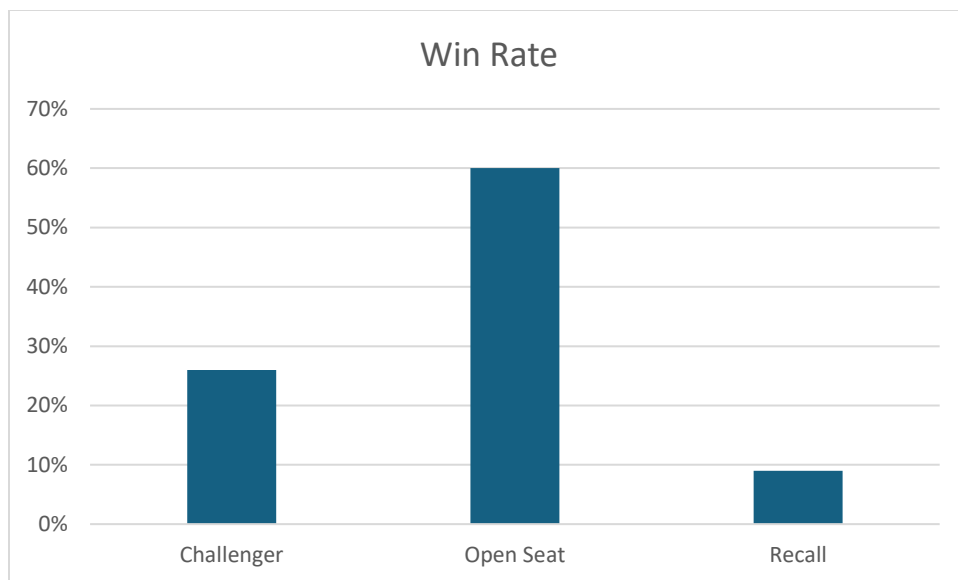
Analysis

West and Orman believe that, “If an individual starts by being well-known, wealthy, and having access to financial support from other backers, that person can run for governor or senator without the usual political apprenticeship of working his or her way up through lower level offices” (2003, 35). This analysis showed that celebrity candidates were more likely to run in federal elections than in state or local elections. While many celebrities aim high in their first attempt at public office, many do not and prefer to try their luck at the local level.

This decision affects their ability to win. As displayed in Figure 3, they were overwhelmingly victorious in local elections. They were less likely to win at the state level and mostly lost in federal elections. This cuts against Canon’s claim that celebrities are exceptional. Like any traditional candidate, it is best for celebrities to start local and work their way up than to try for a big contest first. While Arnold Schwarzenegger and Donald Trump were able to skip lower-level offices and win higher-level offices on their first attempt, this is not typical. Sonny Bono and Jesse Ventura won local elections before moving up to higher offices. Others, like Clint Eastwood, win local office and never attempt a higher office.



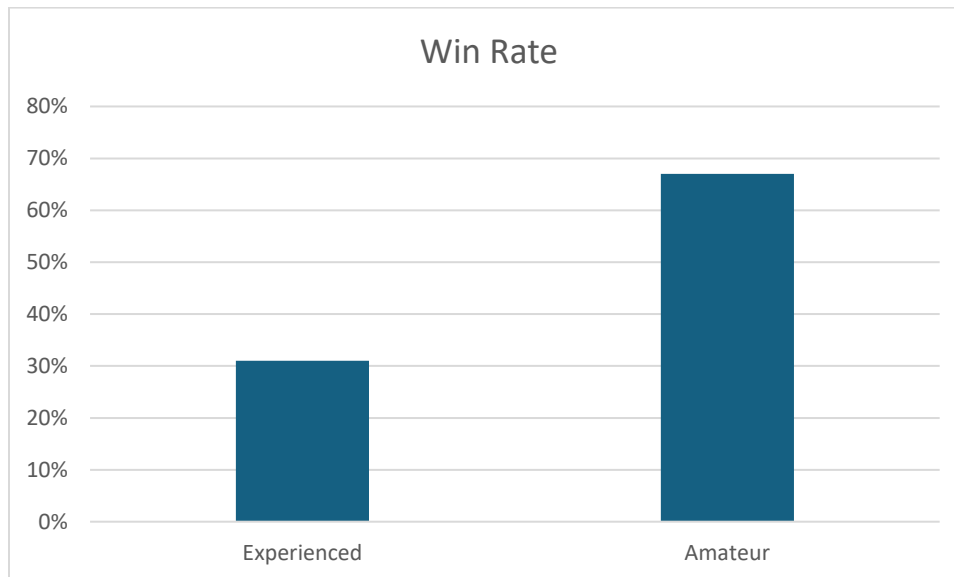
Celebrities were more likely to run in an open seat contest than to take on an incumbent which suggests that celebrities tend to behave strategically and enter races where they have a higher probability of winning. This strategy proves very effective. As displayed in Figure 4, celebrities won most of the open seat contests they were in. They largely lost against incumbents. This means that the normal rules of politics still apply. Newcomers, celebrity or not, are typically unable to dethrone incumbent politicians. Celebrities lost most of the races they entered and rarely earned a majority of the votes. They earned a majority of the votes in only 35% of their races, this does not suggest overwhelming public support for celebrity candidates. In an experimental model where voters were given choices between traditional candidates and celebrity candidates Wright (2019) found that “Overall, both Republicans and Democrats slightly prefer traditional politicians to celebrity candidates.” In the real world, the observed data suggests a strong preference for experienced candidates. Celebrities have advantages, but they are not automatic winners.



Celebrities are not fundraising powerhouses. While it's true that celebrities receive campaign contributions from their celebrity friends, they usually lose the fundraising battle. There are likely several reasons for this. Firstly, PACs tend to support incumbents (Jacobson 1985). First time candidates, celebrity or not, aren't going to be supported by donors whose primary reason for donating is to influence policy outcomes. Not being in a position to influence policy outcomes, first time candidates have difficulty fundraising. Secondly, the donor class is risk averse. Political newcomers are wildcards without campaign or legislative experience. Without a proven track record donors are hesitant to spend valuable funds on candidates that haven't shown they can deliver victories. However, fundraising remains essential to victory. Celebrities that win the fundraising battle tend to win and celebrities that lose the fundraising battle tend to lose.

Consistent with these findings is their fundraising prowess in open seat races compared to their ability to raise funds when they challenge an incumbent. They rarely were able to raise more money than incumbent politicians, against incumbents they won the fundraising contest only 21% of the time. They did much better in open seat races raising more money than their opponents in nearly half (48%) of the open seat contests. They were fundraising winners 46% of the time against amateurs, but only 28% of the time against experienced politicians. With a better chance of winning donors are more likely to take

a risk on novice celebrity candidates in open seat races and in races without an experienced opponent. It was these races that celebrity candidates were more likely to win.



Celebrities do overperform traditional amateur candidates. Canon found that candidates without previous political experience won 25% of their races for the U.S. House (1990). This analysis found that celebrity amateurs won 42% of their races overall and 28% for federal elections. They did less well against experienced politicians but much better against other amateurs. Canon suggests that celebrities are an exception because they benefit from their high levels of name recognition. As displayed in Figure 5, these findings show that celebrities had a 67% win rate against other amateurs even though they out fundraised their amateur opponents only 46% of the time. They have advantages that other amateur candidates don't have. Their higher levels of name recognition and the additional free media attention they receive gives them a competitive edge. The free media attention helps them overcome fundraising difficulties. In this respect, Canon's theory about celebrity amateur candidates remains true with new updated data through 2022.

The overall win rate was far less than Knecht and Rosentrater's (2021) and Wright's (2019) findings. This is primarily due to the different time frame. Those studies included data from 1865 to 2018. There were many celebrity victories prior to 1964 and nine consecutive celebrity losses since 2020. With a small N

the omission of the early 20th century wins, and the addition of many recent losses understandably yielded different results. Mehmet Oz, Herschel Walker, Kari Lake, and Ben Savage all lost in the 2022 election cycle. Some might argue that modern celebrity only begins with the rise of television. Throughout history many people have been famous, but celebrity as we conceive of it today could arguably be a late 20th century phenomenon. In any case, fundraising data was difficult to acquire prior to the adoption of laws in the 1960s and 1970s that required public reporting of campaign contributions.

A second reason for the lower win rate found here was the addition of candidates who dropped out or were considered “joke campaigns” and omitted from previous studies. These candidates filed official paperwork, appeared on the ballot, raised money, and received votes. They are what Canon calls “hopeless amateurs” who receive a tiny percentage of the vote. It made sense to go back and check the win rate for first time candidates between 1865 to 2022 after adding these celebrities. There were a total of 196 celebrity candidates in that time frame. As displayed in Table 1, half of them won and half of them lost. Some of the winners didn’t win on their first attempt but won after several attempts. In other words, after gaining some political experience.

Wins from 1865-2022

1st try	88	45%
2nd try	8	4%
3rd try	2	1%
Never won	98	50%
Total	196	

Given the small N and difficulty in collecting data for local elections a more sophisticated statistical approach was not possible. Still, a fundamental question has been answered. Celebrities are not usually able to out fundraise their opponents. Yet they perform remarkably well compared to traditional

amateur candidates. They tend to win elections when they raise more money than their opponents, run in open seat contests, and run in local elections. They tend to lose elections when they lose the fundraising battle, challenge incumbents, and seek federal offices. This shows that the win rate for celebrity candidates depends on several factors.

Conclusions

Canon places celebrity candidates into the ambitious amateur category because of their advantages. Certainly, many deserve that categorization. Arnold Schwarzenegger led a statewide ballot initiative, gained practice fundraising and giving speeches for that ballot initiative in the year before he ran for governor. He acquired political skills and waited for a state crisis before announcing his run. Similarly, Al Franken set up Midwest Values PAC, engaged in fundraising for his PAC and used the PAC to secure political allies within the Democratic Party in the year before he ran for the US Senate. After learning the ropes and spending time in the trenches of electoral politics he announced his run. Both behaved strategically just as Canon suggested they should.

Yet, many celebrities rightfully belong in the hopeless amateur category. Caitlyn Jenner, Kanye West, Roseanne Barr, Gary Coleman, and others earned 1% of the vote or less. They had no political skills, performed poorly, and were trounced at the polls. Their fame accounted for nothing. Despite getting much more media attention than other “also ran” candidates they didn’t fare any better. Celebrity by itself doesn’t mean a celebrity candidate will automatically get more votes. Celebrities are most successful in local elections, which is where all amateurs perform the best.

Contrary to Canon’s view that celebrities are reluctant to make themselves sacrificial lambs, many enter races they fully expect to lose. When William F. Buckley was asked what he would do if he won the election for mayor of New York City he replied, “Demand a recount” (Associated Press 1965). He was under no illusions he could win. Ben Jones, a Democrat, ran in Republican dominated districts, often against Republican Party leaders and lost most of his elections (Longoria 2022b). Of course, Canon was

aware that, “Some amateurs benefit from being in the right place at the right time” (Canon 1990, 87).

Jones managed to get elected after the incumbent was indicted on money laundering charges. Given his unlikely chances of success Jones had difficulty wooing campaign donors. Jones admitted, “I wasn’t very good at shaking the tin cup” (Jones 2008, 193). Despite the assertions made by those who are interested in celebrity candidates, celebrities turn out to be not very good at fundraising.

While celebrities did overperform compared to other amateur candidates, where they succeeded is important. They tended to win local elections and they tended to win open seat elections. This would be true for any amateur candidate. They performed poorly in federal elections and against incumbents. Like any ordinary candidate, celebrities have difficulty seeking higher profile offices and defeating incumbent politicians. Going forward it is important for researchers not to overestimate a celebrity’s probability of success. Celebrities are not immune from the normal laws of politics despite their advantages.

Celebrity candidates overperform because they benefit from high levels of name recognition. Voters are likely most responsive to name recognition in the low information local elections. Donors are making different calculations. They are likely to have strong policy preferences and are interested in results. They are more likely to shun novice candidates and are unlikely to be keen on “outsider” candidates who seek systemic change. Many celebrity candidates portray themselves as disruptors of the status quo, which may be popular among voters but unpopular among lobbyists and large donors. Because celebrities tend to be wealthy individuals it may also be that donors are reluctant to help someone who should have plenty of money already. Whatever the cause, the findings are important. Celebrity candidates have many important advantages over traditional candidates, but fundraising isn’t one of them.

There are many avenues for further research on this topic. For one, some people are more famous than others. This means that some celebrities will have much more name recognition than others. Arnold Schwarzenegger was an internationally known movie star when he ran for governor of California. Most people have probably not heard of Brad Sellers, who played under the shadow of Michael Jordan on the

Chicago Bulls championship teams in the 1990s. Sellers would go on to become the mayor of a small town in Ohio. The amount of fame or name recognition may be related to political success both in terms of winning percentages and level of office.

Also, there is the factor of timing. Some celebrities run at the height of their fame while others wait until decades later when many people may have forgotten them. Donald Trump and Mehmet Oz left their nationally broadcast television shows to run for office, they gave up one limelight to be in another limelight. Others like Shirley Temple and Anson Williams waited until long after their glory days to seek office. Temple was a famous child star in the 1930s but would run for Congress in the 1960s. Williams was famous for his role as "Potsie" on *Happy Days* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but would run for mayor of Ojai, CA in 2022, more than 40 years after his peak fame. Future work should seek to distinguish between the currently famous and the previously famous as this too should influence their level of success.

What happens after a celebrity candidate wins an election? Are their re-election rates higher, lower, or the same as other incumbents? There are still many unanswered questions in the area of celebrity politics and this study provides a foundation for this interesting niche in political science research.

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Appendix

Celebrity Candidates 1964-2022

Candidate	Year		Office	Level	Fundraising		Opponent	1st Try	
	1st Run	State			Winner	Type		Experience	Win
Armstrong, Samaire	2022	AZ	Mayor Sedona, AZ	L	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Lake, Kari	2022	AZ	Gov	S	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Oz, Mehmet	2022	PA	US Senate	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Savage, Ben	2022	CA	City Council West Hollywood, CA	L	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Walker, Herschel	2022	GA	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Williams, Anson	2022	CA	Mayor Ojai, CA	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Jenner, Caitlyn	2021	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Lodge, Steve	2021	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Experienced	Loss	Loss
West, Kanye	2020	PRES	US President	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Allred, Colin	2018	TX	TX-32	F	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Gonzalez, Anthony	2018	OH	OH-16	F	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Grier, Rosey	2018	CA	Gov	S	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Huffman, Robert Booker (aka "Booker T")	2018	TX	Mayor Houston, TX	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Jacobs, Glenn (aka "Kane")	2018	TN	Mayor Knox County, TN	L	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Neal, Diane	2018	NY	NY-19	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Nixon, Cynthia	2018	NY	Gov	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Sabato Jr., Antonio	2018	CA	CA-26	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Dash, Stacey	2018	CA	CA-44	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Gilbert, Melissa	2016	MI	MI-8	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Kroeger, Gary	2016	IA	IA-1	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Maldonado-Passage Joseph	2016	OK	US President	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Trump, Donald	2016	NY	US President	F	N	Open	Experienced	Win	Plurality
White, Ron	2016	PRES	US President	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Hill, Randal	2016	FL	FL-24	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Lewis, Jason	2016	MN	MN-2	S	N	Open	Amateur	Win	Plurality
Aiken, Clay	2014	NC	NC-2	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Cobb, Garry	2014	NJ	NJ-1	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Tosi, Mao	2014	AK	City Council 5 Anchorage, AK	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Williamson, Marianne	2014	CA	CA-33	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Quezada, Steven Michael	2013	NM	School Board 5 Albuquerque	L	N	Open	Unopposed	Win	Majority
Hertzler, J.G.	2013	NY	City Council Ulysses, NY	L	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Barr, Roseanne	2012	PRES	US President	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Buck, Jason	2012	UT	UT-2	F	N	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Farris, Jimmy	2012	ID	ID-1	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Harris, Napoleon	2012	IL	State Senate 15	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Plurality
Hernandez, Jose	2012	CA	CA-10	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
James, Craig	2012	TX	US Senate	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Overall, Park	2012	TN	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Lewis, Carl	2011	NJ	State Senate 8	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Sellers, Brad	2011	OH	Mayor Warrensville Heights	L	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Smith, Che "Rhymefest"	2011	IL	Alderman Chicago 20th Ward	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Campbell, Luther	2011	FL	Mayor Miami-Dade, FL	L	N	Recall	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Bradley, Shawn	2010	UT	State Assembly 44	S	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Didier, Clint	2010	WA	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Dudley, Chris	2010	OR	Gov	S	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Faulkner, Michel	2010	NY	NY-15	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
McMahon, Linda	2010	CT	US Senate	F	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Riemersma, Jay	2010	MI	MI-2	F	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Runyan, Jon	2010	NJ	NJ-3	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Bing, Dave	2009	MI	Mayor Detroit, MI (special election)	L	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Novoselic, Krist	2009	WA	Clerk of Wahkiakum County WA	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Schwantz, Jim	2009	IL	Mayor Palatine, IL	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Plurality
Rubin, Craig X.	2009	CA	Mayor Los Angeles, CA	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Boulware, Peter	2008	FL	State Assembly 9	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Franken, Al	2008	MN	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Plurality
Johnson, Kevin	2008	CA	Mayor Sacramento, CA	L	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Lindland, "The Law" Matthew	2008	OR	State Assembly 52	S	N	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Mesi, Joe "Baby"	2008	NY	State Senate 61	S	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Wyche, Sam	2008	SC	County Board for Pickens County	L	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Friedman, Richard "Kinky"	2006	TX	Gov	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Hall, John	2006	NY	NY-19	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Jones, Hayes	2006	MI	State Assembly 29	S	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Shuler, Heath	2006	NC	NC-11	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Swann, Lynn	2006	PA	Gov	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Damayo, Melody "Mimi Miyagi"	2006	NV	Gov	S	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Woodruff, Dwayne	2005	PA	Judge Allegheny County	L	N	Open	Amateur	Win	Plurality
Jeffre, Justin	2005	OH	Mayor Cincinnati	L	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Reeves, Martha	2005	MI	City Council Detroit	L	N	Open	Experienced	Win	Plurality

Candidate	Year	State	Office	Level	Fundraising		Opponent	1st Try	
	1st Run				Winner	Type		Experience	Win
Bosetti, Rick	2004	CA	County Board Shasta County	L	Y	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Bass, Randy	2004	OK	State Senate 32	S		Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Chambers, Marilyn	2004	PRES	US Vice President	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Angelyne (Ronja Goldberg)	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Carey, Mary	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Coleman, Gary	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Edler, Dave	2003	WA	City Council 2 Yakima, WA	L		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Flynt, Larry	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Gallagher, Leo	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Grisham, Jack	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Landham, Sonny	2003	KY	Gov	S	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Schwarzenegger, Arnold	2003	CA	Gov	S	Y	Recall	Experienced	Win	Plurality
Skrepenak, Greg	2003	PA	County Board Luzerne County	L	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Plurality
Ueberroth, Peter	2003	CA	Gov	S	N	Recall	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Duffy, Sean	2002	WI	DA Ashland County	S		Open	Unopposed	Win	Majority
Dehere, Terry	2001	NJ	City Council Jersey City	L		Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Autry, Alan	2000	CA	Mayor Fresno, Ca	L	N	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Backlund, Bob	2000	CT	CT-1	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Doyle, Jerry	2000	CA	CA-24	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Osborne, Tom	2000	NE	NE-3	F	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Willingham, Noble	2000	TX	TX-1	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Francis, Russ	1998	HI	HI-2	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Kenn, Mike	1998	GA	County Board Fulton County	L	N	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Lewis, Al "Grandpa"	1998	NY	Gov	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Mitchum, Chris	1998	CA	State Assembly 35	S	N	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Stewart, Jon	1998	IL	State Assembly 11	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Gordon, Barry	1998	CA	CA-27	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Martz, Judy	1996	MT	Lt Gov	S	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Rooker, Jim	1996	PA	PA-4	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Ryun, Jim	1996	KS	KS-2	F	N	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Sax, Steve	1996	CA	State Assembly 4	S	N	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Garlits, Don "Big Daddy"	1994	FL	FL-5	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Kenney, Bill	1994	MO	State Senate 8	S		Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Krause, Paul	1994	MN	Commissioner 2 Dakota County	L		Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Kuehl, Sheila James	1994	CA	State Assembly 41	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Largent, Steve	1994	OK	OK-1	F	N	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Stern, Howard	1994	NY	Gov	S	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Thompson, Fred	1994	TN	US Senate	F	N	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Watts, J. C.	1994	OK	OK-4	F	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Page, Alan	1992	MN	State Supreme Court	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Heidt, Horace Jr.	1992	CA	State Assembly 40	S	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Laughlin, Tom	1992	CA	US President	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
McConkey, Phil	1990	NJ	NJ-12	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Mildren, Jack	1990	OK	Lt Gov	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Ventura, Jesse	1990	MN	Mayor Brooklyn Park, MN	L		Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Waite, Ralph	1990	CA	CA-34	F	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Bono, Sonny	1988	CA	Mayor Palm Springs, CA	L	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Plurality
Thomas, Robert	1988	IL	Judge DuPage County	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Mazerowski, Bill	1987	PA	Commissioner Westmoreland County	L	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Butler, Jerry "Iceman"	1986	IL	Commissioner Cook County	L		Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Eastwood, Clint	1986	CA	Mayor Carmel, CA	L	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Grandy, Fred	1986	IA	IA-6	F	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Jones, Ben	1986	GA	GA-4	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
McMillen, Tom	1986	MD	MD-4	F	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Hargett, Edd	1985	TX	TX-1	F	Y	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Kulp, Nancy	1984	PA	PA-9	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Lousma, Jack	1984	MI	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Campbell, Ben Nighthorse	1982	CO	State Representative 59	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Marin, Jack	1982	NC	NC-2	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Peace, Stephen	1982	CA	State Assembly 80	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Zirkilton, Steven	1982	ME	State Assembly 43	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Kelly, Jack	1980	CA	City Council Huntington Beach	L	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Rutkowski, Ed	1979	NY	County Executive Erie County	L	N	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Biafra, Jello	1979	CA	Mayor San Francisco, CA	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Petty, Richard	1978	NC	Commissioner Randolph County	L		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Baker, John H.	1978	NC	Sheriff Wake County	L	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Bradley, Bill	1978	NJ	US Senate	F	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Curb, Mike	1978	CA	Lt Gov	S	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
James, Fob	1978	AL	Gov	S	Y	Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Swigert, Jack	1978	CO	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss

Candidate	Year		Office	Level	Fundraising		Opponent	1st Try	
	1st Run	State			Winner	Type		Experience	Win
Bunning, Jim	1977	KY	City Council Fort Thomas, KY	L				Win	
Hayden, Tom	1976	CA	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Richardson, Bobby	1976	SC	SC-5	F	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Schmitt, Harrison "Jack"	1976	NM	US Senate	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Vincent, Ed	1975	CA	City Council 4 Inglewood, CA	L		Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Dornan, Bob	1973	CA	Mayor Los Angeles, CA	L		Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Takei, George	1973	CA	City Council Los Angeles, CA	L	N	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Lash, Don	1972	IN	State Representative 32	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Yarborough, Cale	1972	SC	Commissioner Florence County	L		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Nelson, Bill	1972	FL	State Representative 47	S	Y	Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Kemp, Jack	1970	NY	NY-39	F		Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Thompson, Hunter S.	1970	CO	Sheriff Pitkin County	L		Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Mailer, Norman	1969	NY	Mayor New York City, NY	L	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Wedemeyer, Herman John	1968	HI	City Council Honolulu, HI	L		Open	Experienced	Win	Majority
Merrill, Gary	1968	ME	ME-1	F	N	Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Paulson, Pat	1968	CA	US President	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Gregory, Dick	1967	IL	Mayor Chicago, IL	L		Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Byrne, Tommy	1967	NC	City Commissioner Wake Forest, NC	L		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Garn, Jake	1967	UT	Commissioner Salt Lake City, UT	L		Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Black, Shirley Temple	1967	CA	CA-11	F	N	Open	Amateur	Loss	Loss
Gola, Tom	1966	PA	State Assembly 170	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Mizell, Wilmer	1966	NC	Commissioner Davidson County	L		Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Mathias, Bob	1966	CA	CA-18	F	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Reagan, Ronald	1966	CA	Gov	S	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Schabarum, Pete	1966	CA	State Assembly 49	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Majority
Corey, Wendell	1965	CA	City Council Santa Monica, CA	L		Open	Experienced	Win	Plurality
Buckley, William F.	1965	NY	Mayor New York City, NY	L	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Lauricella, Hank	1964	LA	State Representative Jefferson Parish	S		Open	Amateur	Win	Plurality
Glenn, John	1964	OH	US Senate	F		Challenger	Experienced	Loss	Loss
Murphy, George	1964	CA	US Senate	F	Y	Challenger	Experienced	Win	Majority
Wilkinson, Bud	1964	OK	US Senate	F	N	Open	Experienced	Loss	Loss