

This year's presidential primaries have attracted a large number of candidates with no political experience, including Donald Trump, Carly Fiorina, and Ben Carson. These candidates claimed that their lack of experience is an advantage, allowing them to shake up a system that does not appear to be working, which will in turn allow them to become better presidents. This argument has met some resistance. I have a colleague who says that he does not want an intern as president. My colleague thinks that a political novice will make mistakes that a person with political experience would not make. In an article in the Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, Professors Marc Poitras and Dan Sutter present a model that implies that voters should want presidential candidates with some political experience. They argue that the politician's performance at a lower level of political office sends a signal for whether a candidate will abuse power once he or she attains a higher office. Voters can benefit by having candidates for high office who have proved that they can do a good job at a lower level political position. The voters are better off by not taking a chance on an unknown.

Perhaps we can gain some insight into how a candidate with no political experience will do once in office by looking at the past for guidance. There have been 5 presidents who have not been governors or members of Congress before they were president. All 5 had military backgrounds. We can judge their job performance against the performance of the presidents who had political experience before they assumed the presidency.

To evaluate presidential performance, I will use a ranking of presidential performance published by the Brookings Institute. The ranking was created from a survey of Political Scientists who have an expertise in the American Presidency. In the ranking Abraham Lincoln was ranked number one and James Buchanan was ranked last at 43.

At first glance, political experience seems to make no difference at all. The average ranking of the 5 Presidents with no political experience was 22. Those with political experience also had an average ranking of 22. Perhaps a bit shockingly, the averages are exactly the same.

However, an important difference does exist that is not captured by simply comparing averages. The job performance of presidents with no political experience is very variable. These presidents have been either very good or very bad. The very good presidents were George Washington, who is ranked number 2 and just trails Abraham Lincoln, and Dwight Eisenhower, who ranks number 7. The remaining 3 presidents who had no prior political experience are Ulysses S Grant, ranked 28, Zachary Taylor, ranked 33, and Franklin Pierce, ranked 40.

In this election cycle or in future election cycles, if voters elect a candidate without any political experience, put on your seat belt. We will be in for an uncertain ride since the president is likely to be far better or far worse than usual.

As a closing point, I will make another prediction. I find it unlikely that we will draw military leaders into the presidency as we have in the past. The nature of warfare has changed in a way that makes it harder for an individual general to attract glory. If this is true, then the outsiders who make a run for the presidency are likely to have a business background, simply because this is a venue that enables the successful to point to accomplishments that they can use to bolster the case that they are effective leaders