The Veteran Advantage:

The Impact of Previous Military Service

on Electoral Performance in the United States

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom posits that candidates' past military service provides them with an advantage when running for office. Using a Regression Discontinuity design as well as a matching design with data for U.S. House of Representatives races between 2010 and 2022, I show that Democratic veterans, but not Republicans, enjoy an advantage when running for office. This advantage mainly comes from increased appeal to independent voters and some cross-party appeal, but not from specific views about defense-related issues. I also show that Representatives who are veterans tend to be more ideologically moderate and have higher legislative effectiveness in recent Congresses, particularly those from the Democratic party.

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1 Introduction

Military service is thought to ingrain many of the characteristics usually perceived as essential to leadership. For example, veterans are often perceived as patriotic individuals willing to sacrifice themselves on their country's behalf (e.g., Jennings and Markus, 1977) . In a country like the United States, where the military is often held in high regard, conventional wisdom tells us that military veterans should perform better in elections compared to their non-veteran counterparts. In fact, political parties oftentimes actively recruit military veterans as candidates. For example, there is evidence that parties have engaged in intensive efforts to recruit Iraq and Afghanistan veterans as candidates for the 2006 and 2008 congressional races, for example (Rothenberg, 2007). Additionally, media reports have highlighted the Democratic effort to recruit veterans during the 2018 midterms (e.g., Kesling, 2018) and Republican efforts trying the replicate the perceived success of that strategy afterwards (e.g., Mutnick, 2021). This is a tradition that dates back to the origins of the United States. Prominent U.S. Presidents like George Washington, Ulysses Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower were, in large part, elected as a consequence of their military successes and leadership positions in the American Revolution, the American Civil War, and World World II, respectively. While not all U.S. Presidents had prominent military service, two-thirds of them have served in the military. In fact, it is difficult to imagine at least some of them becoming President without their prior military experience.

Military veterans make up about 20% of the members of the 118th (2023–2025) United States Congress.[1] This figure has been declining since the 1980s, especially after World War II veterans, a significant proportion of the U.S. male population at the time, began retiring from office. Nonetheless, the proportion of veterans in Congress remains significantly higher than the proportion of veterans in the U.S. voting-age population, which is slightly under 7%. It is also higher than the proportion of veterans among the male voting-age population, which stands at 14% in 2022.[2] Historically, the proportion of Members of Congress with past military

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[1]As of April 28, 2023, there are 97 full members (Representatives and Senators) with past military service.

[2]It should be noted, moreover, that the majority of veterans in Congress are male, so the over-representation of veterans among male members of Congress, is even higher.

Figure 1: Members of Congress with Past Military Service
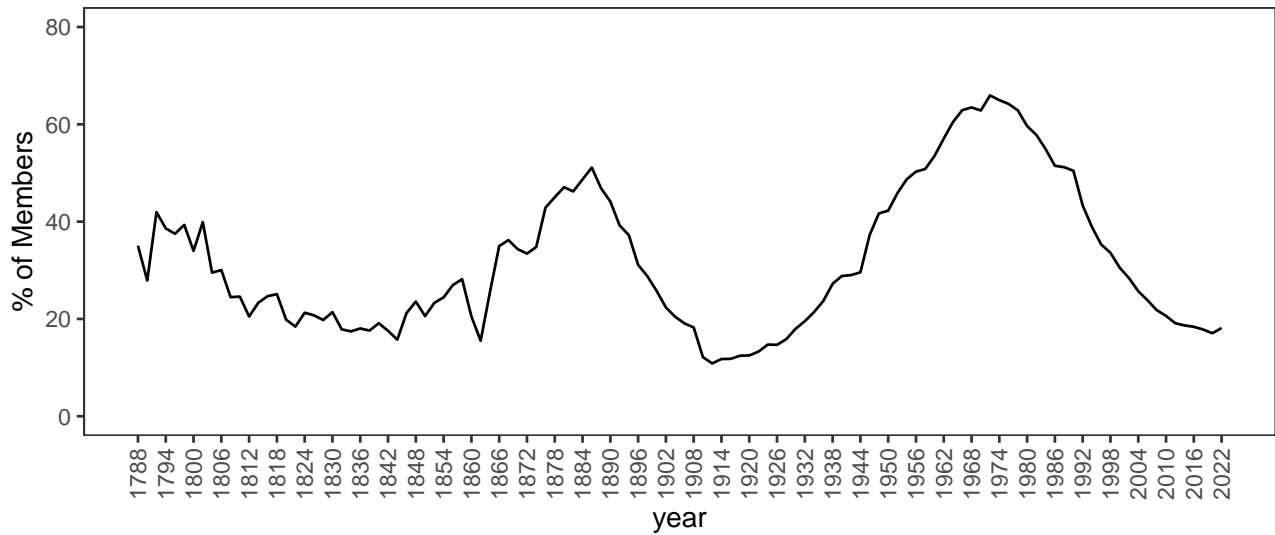
Past service identified from the Library of Congress' Bio Guides, based on mention of specific words related to military service. Values are likely an underestimate prior to the 1990s.

service has varied widely and been governed by major conflicts. The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the combination of both World Wars lead to large increases in the number of veterans followed by slow declines as those members aged and retired. However, throughout the entire U.S. history, veterans have been typically over-represented relative to their share of the adult population (and the male adult population). This over-representation could stem from multiple, non-exclusive, sources: (1) more interest among veterans in running for office, (2) more recruitment by parties and greater success in gaining nominations, and (3) a higher electoral performance in General Elections. This article focuses on the third.

Determining whether, and to what extent, veterans have an advantage in Congressional elections matters because there is evidence that veterans and civilians in Congress behave somewhat differently, at least in some respects of the job. Bianco (2005), analyses a limited number key defense and foreign policy votes in the 102-104th Congress and 91st-92nd House, and finds that while there is an impact of veteran status on members' votes, this impact is typically small and overpowered by partisanship and ideology. Cormack (2021), on the other hand, finds that veteran members tend to introduce more bills and discuss veterans' issues more often; and

Hagner (2020) finds that veterans, mainly those serving post-9/11, have increased legislative effectiveness, particularly on defense issues. Lupton (2022) finds significant differences in roll call votes between veterans and non-veterans who were eligible for the Vietnam draft. She finds these effects particularly on issues dealing with defense, arms, and oversight of the military. Swers (2007) finds limited evidence of veterans being more likely to sponsor bills on defense policy, but highlights that past military service facilitates Senators' ability to become leaders on national security issues. Hildebrandt et al. (2013) finds that veterans in Congress during the 1990s were slightly more likely to support humanitarian interventions abroad. Finally, Lowande et al. (2019), who analyze communications between members of Congress and federal agencies, find that veteran members (especially those with active duty service) are more likely to work on behalf of veteran constituents, thus impacting policy implementation. Overall, this literature suggests that the degree of representation of veterans in Congress can impact Congressional activity in terms of bills proposed, roll call votes, and oversight activities.

In this paper, I present evidence of the impact of veteran status on electoral performance in House of Representative elections between 2010 and 2022, which helps explain (at least part of) the over-representation of veterans in Congress. I use two alternative research designs that show robust findings: a regression discontinuity design (RDD) and a matching estimator. The RDD design focuses on a sub-sample of General Election races with competitive primaries in which at least one primary election candidate was a veteran. By focusing on very close primary races, the RDD design allows for a comparison of veterans who were barely nominated by their parties and non-veterans who were barely nominated by their parties (by defeating a veteran in the primary). This way, veteran status in the General Election can be considered as-if randomly assigned, which allows for a causal estimation of the impact of a veteran running for office on General Election performance.[3] The matching design, which complements the RDD findings,

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[3]Marshall (2022) notes that RD designs of this type are not able to fully identify the impact candidate characteristics on electoral performance, mainly because it is expected that the opponents will potentially change their behavior when facing a candidate with the characteristic of interest (veteran status in this case). However, these designs can instead identify the impact of a candidate with said characteristics running for office, which in this case encompass the impact of veteran status of the candidates themselves plus any impact of the strategies their opponents may simultaneously choose in response.

relies instead on data from all contested General Elections in the same period and directly accounts for differences in the districts in which veterans and non-veterans run by matching on pre-existing district characteristics and incumbency status. I apply these two designs to two types of data: aggregate data at the Congressional District level, and individual voter data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Kuriwaki, 2022).

My findings show that military veterans running for the House of Representatives enjoy a General Election advantage, but only those from the Democratic party. Democratic veterans outperform their non-veteran co-partisans by about 6 or 7 percentage points when using aggregate data, and by about 4 percentage points based on individual-level data. The advantage for Democratic veterans comes mostly from increased support from voters who identify as Independent, and some cross-party support from voters who identify as Republican. Additionally, I find that Democratic veterans' advantage is larger among voters from non-military families than among voters from military families, suggesting that homophily does not explain this veteran advantage (although this difference is only marginally statistically significant). At the same time, I find no evidence that views on troop deployments abroad or on defense budget cuts explain the Democratic veteran advantage.

I also show that veterans serving in the House of Representatives tend to be somewhat more ideologically moderate than their non-veteran co-partisans, particularly for members of the Democratic Caucus. This suggests that the veteran advantage observed among Democratic candidates may stem from their ability to present themselves as more moderate, thus attracting more support from Independent and some Republican voters. Finally, I show that members of Congress with past military service tend to have higher Legislative Effectiveness Scores (Volden and Wiseman, 2014). For the period between the 112th and 117th Congresses (2010–2022), this higher effectiveness is mostly observed among Democratic veterans who are approximately 15% more effective than their non-veteran co-partisans.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses related literature. Section 3 discusses the different data sources as well as the main RDD and matching methodology

applied. Section 4 presents the results on veteran advantage as well as legislative behavior. Finally, Section 5 concludes and briefly suggests avenues for future research.

2   Related Literature

Political science research has shown that American voters are not particularly politically informed (e.g., Alvarez, 1998). Large numbers of Americans are unable to identify their Representative's name (Jacobson, 2004), struggle with describing the roll call votes their Representatives make, are unable to identify the stances on several issues taken by candidates in their districts (Krasno, 1994), among many others. Nonetheless, there is also an extensive literature that studies how voters overcome this lack of political information. In particular, researchers have found that voters use candidate cues to make inferences about candidates, and make voting decisions based on them (Popkin, 1991). Partisanship is the strongest such cue, but not the only one.

Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) identify two different groups of stereotypes that serve as information cues for voters. On the one hand, there are trait stereotypes, which are assumptions about a candidate's personality and character. Belief stereotypes, on the other hand, provide voters with cues on which types of issues a candidate is likely to be well-versed on and the general ideological positions that she might take. Political scientists have studied a wide array of belief and trait stereotypes. For example, women tend to be perceived as more liberal (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Koch, 2000; McDermott, 1997), religious affiliation is seen as a sign of general conservative stands (McDermott, 2009), and adulterers are perceived as less trustworthy public officials (Funk, 1996), among many others.

Integrity, competence, and reliability are among the candidate traits that voters find particularly important (Miller et al., 1986). McDermott and Panagopoulos (2015), note that candidates performing well on those traits are typically more attractive to voters. And veterans are typically stereotyped as individuals with high levels of integrity, competence, and reliability. Moreover, veterans are typically seen as having a more developed sense of patriotism and being

more selfless (Jennings and Markus, 1977). McDermott and Panagopoulos (2015) show that Americans tend to give military leaders higher ratings in terms of general leadership, personal integrity, professional integrity, and knowledge and abilities, when compared to elected officials in the executive or legislative branches as well as business leaders. This suggests that veterans might have an advantage relative to non-veterans in running for Congress, since voters (especially the less informed ones) are likely to associate their part military service with desirable candidate characteristics.

An issue closely related to trait stereotypes is the general bias of the electorate towards candidates who are "like them." In the military sphere, Scribane (1983) finds that veterans tend to have a higher opinion of a candidate who is a veteran or a decorated soldier. This higher opinion might also translate into a higher probability of voting for that veteran, among voters who are veterans themselves.

There are also belief stereotypes associated with military service. In particular, Dempsey (2010) shows that veterans are usually associated with heightened support for military interventions. Regins et al. (1995) find that the general public perceives veterans as experts on military matters and foreign policy. Davis (2001) finds that military veterans are, on average, more likely to be Republican than civilians are, and that this is generally known by the overall population. These informational cues might also, in turn, influence voters' choices.

Evidence from media reports show that parties (and the media itself) are not immune to these stereotypes, and seem to act on them. There is ample evidence from the media that political parties actively try to recruit veterans to run for office, partly because they expect them to perform better than their non-veteran counterparts (see, e.g., Kuczka, 2007; Rothenberg, 2007; Walsh, 2022b; Weissert, 2021; Kesling, 2018; Merica and Grayer, 2018; Mutnick, 2021). Additionally, a candidate's veteran status is a quality generally highlighted during campaigns. In many races where a veteran runs for office, the media tends to discuss the surge in veteran candidates or the military vote potentially benefiting the veteran candidate (Kirkpatrick, 2004; Shear, 2004; Lengell, 2008; Shane, 2022; Walsh, 2022a).

But is the conventional wisdom that veterans tend to perform better in elections true? Somit (1948) and Somit and Tanenhaus (1957) examined the validity of this conventional wisdom mainly motivated by the fact that post-World War II, political parties were actively recruiting war veterans to run for office. Their findings, using multiple cross-tabulations, are indicative that there might be some degree of validity to the conventional wisdom, but the association was relatively weak. Teigen (2008) analyzes contested Congressional elections in the early 2000s and finds that a candidate's veteran status translates into higher vote shares, but only sporadically and depending on the party and particular election under study. Richardson (2022) finds that there is an advantage for veterans running for U.S. Senate in the period between 1982 and 2016. This advantage is more clear for Democratic veterans who are running in open seats and with experience in deployed war zones. This evidence relies on observational data, from which it is often difficult to tease apart the (potential) impact of the veteran status of the candidates from the fact that these candidates may choose to run for seats with specific characteristics that may favor them. Of course, these studies typically control for district characteristics including, centrally, the proportion of veterans in the district's population.

Other authors take a different approach that overcomes the usual challenges of observational data, by relying instead on experimental studies. Teigen (2013) uses on a survey experiment with potential voters in which candidates' biographies are manipulated. His findings show that military experience increases voters' perceptions of a candidate's ability to handle defense issues. However, these results did not translate into overall candidate ratings or leadership ratings. It is not clear, however, how these results would translate into vote choice, since this was not included in the study. McDermott and Panagopoulos (2015) rely on a similar survey experiment labeling a hypothetical candidate as an Iraq War veteran. Their findings show that voters are more likely to indicate support for veteran candidates. In both articles, researchers found that any advantages are greater for Democratic veteran candidates then for Republican ones. Hardy et al. (2019) also rely on an experimental study in which veteran status (and other characteristics) of candidates is randomly varied. They find that veteran candidates are

more highly rated by voters in terms of foreign policy and terrorism competences. Thus, the experimental evidence is consistent with the expectations that veterans running for office may have an electoral advantage.

3   Data and Methods

3.1   Empirical Challenge and Methods

Estimating the impact of candidate veteran status on electoral performance in a general election is complicated by the fact that veteran status (or rather, where and when veterans run) is not random. Instead, veterans may be more likely to live in certain districts, they may be more likely to run in certain districts, or the population of certain districts may be more attracted to veterans in the first place. In fact, Appendix Figure A1 shows that districts in which veterans run for General Election between 2010 and 2022 are systematically different from those in which non-veterans run. In particular, veterans are more likely to run in districts that favor Republicans in Presidential elections; where there are a higher proportion of veteran voters and active members in the Armed Forces, where the average level of education is lower; where a higher percentage of the population is white; where unemployment is slightly smaller; and in districts located in the South.[4]

For these reasons, comparing the performance of veterans and non-veterans in General Elections runs the risk of bias due to endogeneity. It is not straightforward to predict the direction of the bias, but some informed speculation is possible. For example, given that veterans tend to run in district that tend to favor Republicans in Presidential elections, it is likely that a direct comparison will underestimate the performance of Democratic veterans and overestimate that of Republican veterans relative to their non-veteran co-partisans.

To address this empirical challenge I rely on two alternative methods. The first is a regression discontinuity design (RDD) that exploits primary races to define a set of comparable General

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[4]The definition of South is that used by the U.S. Census Bureau

Election candidates. The second is relies on matching on district characteristics, to account for differences in the districts in which veterans run.

The RDD design implemented here proposes to compare a specific subgroup of candidates: veteran candidates who competed in a primary against a non-veteran and barely won and those non-veteran candidates who competed in a primary against a veteran and barely won. The reason for focusing on these types of candidates is that, the veterans, as a group, are likely to be a good counterfactual to the non-veterans when studying General Election performance. This is because in a very close primary election race, the winner of the race is almost as-if randomly assigned. That means, we should expect the group of veteran candidates in the RDD design to be otherwise very similar to the group of non-veteran candidates. Thus, veteran status being the only systematic difference between the two groups, it is possible to estimate the effect of this characteristics without bias.[5]

My main results from the RDD approach come from the simplest implementation of this type of design, which I estimate using the following regression model:

$$General_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Veteran_i + \beta_2 PrimaryMargin_i + \beta_3 Veteran \times PrimaryMargin_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where $General_i$ is a measure of the performance of candidate i in the general election; $Veteran_i$ is a dummy variable that equals 1 if candidate i is a veteran; and $PrimaryMargin_i$ is the margin of victory for candidate i in the primary election. The effect of interest is captured by β_1. The main specification of the RD design relies only on primary elections in which the margin of victory in the primary was under 30 percentage points. In addition to this simple RDD model, I also present estimates using the robust RDD design from Calonico et al. (2017).

The second approach relies on matching on district characteristics. I use data for the entire 2010-2022 period, which helps overcome the external validity issues of the RDD approach,

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[5]Marshall (2022) notes that since the candidates not possessing the characteristic of interest (here veteran status) might behave differently, RDD estimates are better understood as the impact of a military veteran running for office, rather than the impact of the veteran status of the candidate.

which only focuses on a narrow set of races that had a contested primary. In particular, I rely on propensity score matching with a caliper equal to 0.2 standard deviations of the score. The propensity score is calculated based on a series of district characteristics which include: performance of the Democratic party in the most recent Presidential Election in the district; percentage of the adult population that are veterans; percentage of the adult population that are currently serving in the Armed Forces; percentage of the adult population by educational attainment (high-school or lower, some college, associate degree, bachelor's degree, graduate degree); percentage of the adult population by race and ethnicity (native american, asian, black, hispanic, and white); district median income; percentage of families in poverty; and unemployment rate. Additionally, the propensity score model also includes a variable indicating whether the candidate is an incumbent as well as year fixed-effects (see next subsection for data sources).

3.2 Data and Sources

The analysis focuses exclusively on House races. Data on General Election results come from CQ Voting and Elections Collection for the period 2010–2020 (CQ, 2022). Results for 2022 races come from each state's Secretary of State, Board of Elections, or similar official election reporting agency.[6]

To implement the RD design, data on primary elections is also necessary. Given that the focus is on contested primary races that are competitive (or at least not too-lopsided), I collected election results for all primary races in which the margin of victory was under 30 percentage points. These data come from each state's Secretary of State, Board of Elections, or similar official election reporting agency.

The key variable in all analyses in this article is the veteran status of a particular candidate. Data on military service for candidates was collected from a variety of sources. Information on incumbent candidates come primarily from the Library of Congress' BioGuides of Members

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[6]Results for cycles in which Maine uses Ranked Choice Voting in the General Election correspond to the first round, before any third party votes are re-distributed.

of Congress (Library of Congress, 2022a). Data on challengers (and confirmatory data on incumbents) for 2022, 2020, and 2018 come from the Military Times, which identified candidates in Federal Elections with past military service (Shane, 2018, 2020, 2022). Partial data for 2010, 2012, and 2014 come from Veterans Campaign old news reports (www.veteranscampaign.org). A candidate was identified as a military veteran if identified as so in one of these sources, and as a non-veteran if none of these sources identify them as one. Overall, these data sources cover a large proportion of candidates running for General Election. In some instances repeat challengers' veteran status can be identified from information from a different year in which they ran.

While the previous sources are fairly comprehensive, a substantial amount of data collection on past military service relied on primarily campaign websites, with complementary information from old news reports, bios from Ballotpedia (www.ballotpedia.org), and bios from VoteSmart (https://justfacts.votesmart.org/). The reliance on campaign websites and similar information is mainly for challengers running in the 2010 and 2016 General Elections as well as for the majority of primary election candidates used in the RD design. When relying on campaign website data, research assistants visited, to the extent possible, the campaign website of the candidates' from the corresponding election year using either the Library of Congress' United States Elections Web Archive (Library of Congress, 2022b), or relying on the Wayback Machine (http://web.archive.org/) after identifying campaign website's URL from other sources. A candidate was assumed to be a veteran if any of these sources indicated so; and assumed not to be a veteran if none of these sources indicate it.[7] In all cases, service in the National Guard is included together with service in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

After collecting the veteran status data, I restrict the sample for the matching estimator to General Election races with both a Democrat and a Republican running. Table 1 shows the number of veterans and non-veterans from each party in the data. Please note that the unit of observation in this table is the candidate-cycle. Overall, 20.2% of candidate-cycles are military

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[7]There is a small number of candidates for which no information was available online. These candidates are not included in the data.

veterans. This figure, however, is not balanced across parties: about two-thirds of veteran candidate-cycles come from the Republican party, and only one-third from the Democratic party.

Table 1: Data by Party and Veteran Status, Matching Sample

Party	Non-Veterans	Veterans	Total
Democratic	2,315	399	2,714
Republican	2,018	696	2,714
Total	4,333	1,095	5,428

The sample for the RD design is restricted to: (1) General Election races contested by the two main parties; (2) with a primary race in which the margin of victory was under 30 percentage points; and (3) where a veteran was either the winner (and thus became the General Election candidate) or runner up (and thus a non-veteran become the General Election candidate, but a veteran could have been). The RDD sample is further restricted to excluded data from some state-cycles that use primary election systems other than first-past-the-post (with or without runoff), as they are no appropriate for the RD design used here.[8] With these restrictions, the sample characteristics for the RD design are presented in Table 2. There are a total of 360 races used in the RD design, 159 for the Democratic party and 201 for the Republican party. In about 45% of Democratic primary races the veteran in the primary became the party's nominee, whereas in about 53% of Republican primary races the veteran became the party's nominee.

Table 2: Data by Party and Veteran Status, RDD Sample

Party	Non-Veterans	Veterans	Total
Democratic	89	70	159
Republican	95	106	201
Total	184	176	360

For individual-level voter analyses, I use data from the 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), to obtain individual voter information to match with the aggregate data. The individual-voter data allows me to test hypotheses about

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[8]For example, California is excluded from 2012 onward because of the top-two primary system. So are all years for Washington. Louisiana is also excluded due to its jungle primary. Alaska is excluded for 2022 due to its newly implemented top-4 primary

the impact that voters' own partisan identification, veteran status, and views on defense issues has on the veteran advantage (or lack thereof).

For the analysis in Section 4.3 that focus on the behavior of Representatives in Congress between the 93rd and 117th Congresses, I use BioGuides to identify those who previously served in the military.[9] For the analysis of member ideology, I rely on the first dimension of Nokken-Poole nominate scores (Lewis et al., 2021) downloaded from VoteView.[10] For the analysis on Legislative Effectiveness, I use the Legislative Effectiveness Scores developed by Volden and Wiseman (2014) available from the Center for Effective Lawmaking.[11] I use additional variables from these datasets as controls on those analyses.

4   Results

In this section I first present results from aggregate data, and then results based on analyses using individual-voter survey data. Finally, I presents the results on ideology and legislative effectiveness of Representatives in Congress and the impact of past military service.

4.1   Aggregate Data

Figure 2 presents three alternative estimates of the impact of veteran status among Republican and Democratic General Election candidates. The first two sets of results rely on the RDD approach: it's simple linear implementation and the robust RD design proposed in Calonico et al. (2017). Both RDD results present very similar estimates, but those from the robust design have larger standard errors. This is likely due to the higher data demands from the robust estimator combined with the relatively small sample size.[12] Given that the estimates from the two RDD approaches are very similar, but the linear model has more precise estimates,

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[9]Information on past military service from older Congresses may be incomplete in BioGuides. For this reason, these analyses may contain some amount of measurement error in the main independent variable.

[10]See https://voteview.com/

[11]See https://thelawmakers.org/

[12]Appendix Figure **??** shows the Regression Discontinuity plot with observations in bins of size 10 using the optimal functional form from the Robust RDD.

hereafter I focus exclusively on the linear RDD results.

The RDD results show that Democratic veteran candidates obtain, on average, a voteshare that is 7.32 percentage points higher than their non-veteran counterparts. This difference is statistically significant at the 5% level.[13] Republican veteran candidates, on the other hand, obtain on average a voteshare that is 0.85 percentage points higher than their non-veteran counterparts, a difference that is very close to zero and not statistically significant.

Figure 2: Aggregate Data Estimates of Veteran Advantage
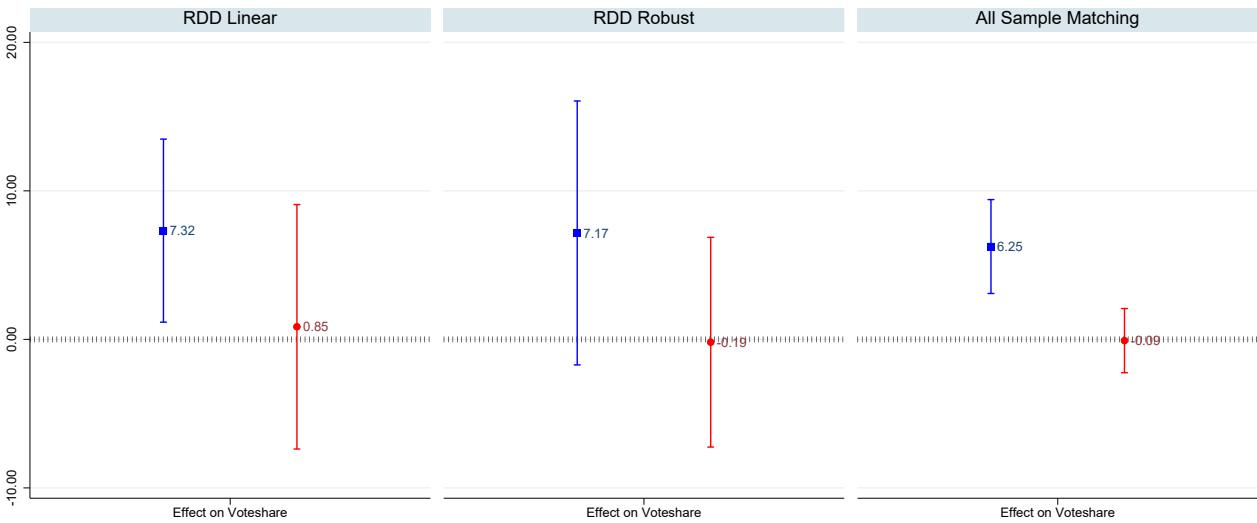
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. RDD Linear and RDD Robust rely on the small sample for RDD. All Sample Matching uses the entire sample of contested races of 2010–2022 with matching by district covariates.

The Appendix presents two types of validation of the RD design. Figure A2 presents placebo tests using the Linear RDD approach for a variety of district characteristics. The results show no significant differences in any of the variables considered between veteran and non-veteran candidates. This provides evidence that the RD design achieves balance, at least on those characteristics. Figure A3 shows McCrary's manipulation test. The results show no evidence of a discontinuity in the distribution of primary election margins of victory ($t = -0.369$ and $p = 0.712$), reinforcing the idea that in very close primary races, veteran status can be considered as-if randomly assigned.

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[13]Note that in the Robust RDD, this estimate is about the same, but its p-value is 0.089

The right-most panel of Figure 2 shows the results from the matching estimates that rely on the entire sample of races contested by the two parties between 2010 and 2022. The results are comparable in size to those from the RDD approach, simultaneously reducing internal validity concerns in the matching estimates and external validity concerns about the RDD results. In particular, the matching estimates show that Democratic veterans have a statistically significant advantage of 6.25 percentage points in voteshare, whereas there is no such advantage for Republican veterans.

Overall, these aggregate results show that veterans running for office from the Democratic party enjoy a General Election advantage of about 6% to 7% in vote share, whereas Republican veterans do not enjoy any advantage. Figure A4 in the Appendix shows linear RDD estimates using the number of votes obtained by the candidate as well as an indicator variable for winning the General Election as outcome variables. The pattern of results is the same as in the case of voteshare: Democratic veterans enjoy an advantage, whereas there is no evidence of such an advantage among Republican veterans. It should be noted, however, that the effect on the probability of winning the General Election is not statistically significant. This is likely due to three factors: (1) in gerrymandered districts such as those of recent elections, many factors may influence the vote share of candidates, but it is much difficult for any factor to overcome a district's partisan lean; (2) a relatively small sample size; and (3) the fact that more often than not, contested primaries tend to occur for challengers but not for incumbents.

4.2   Individual-Level Data and Heterogeneous Effects

The previous subsection establishes that there is a veteran advantage for House candidates from the Democratic party, but not for those from the Republican party. Here, I first replicate these results using individual-level survey data. Second, I try to understand the source of this advantage by exploring heterogeneous effects by: (1) voters' party identification; (2) voters' belonging to military families; and (3) voters' views on some defense-related issues.

Given the similarity between the RDD and matching results in the aggregate data, the

Figure 3: Individual-level Data Estimates & Heterogeneous Effects by Voters' Party ID
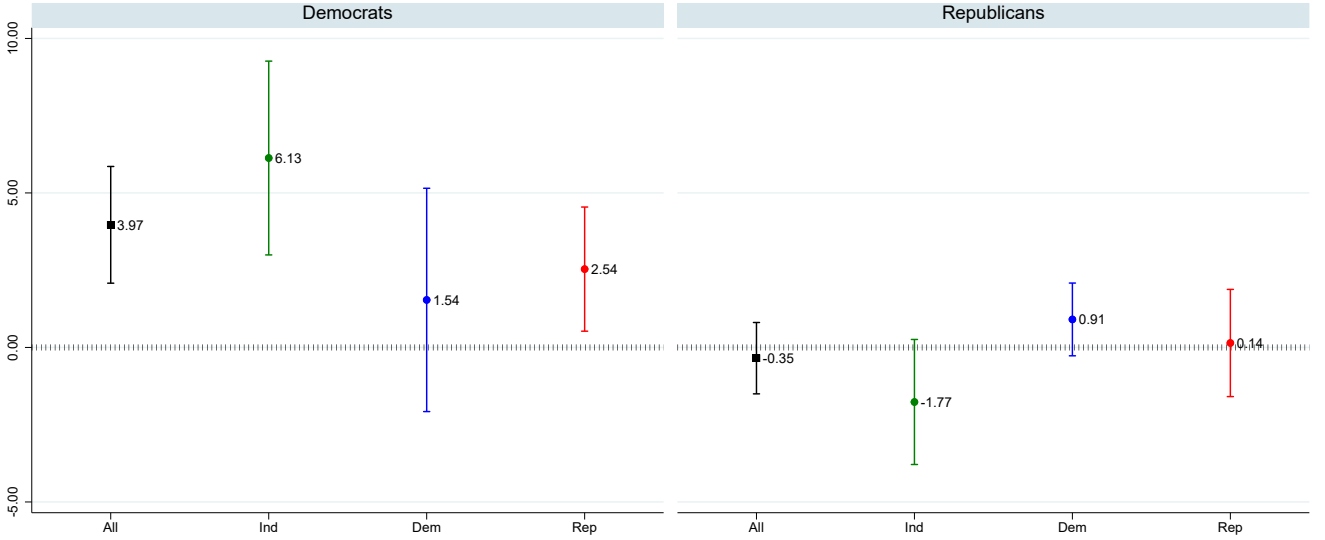
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. All estimates come from the matching estimator.

individual-voter data results presented in this subsection rely on the matching estimates because of their higher level of precision (due to larger sample size). However, estimates relying on the RDD design using individual-level voter data are qualitatively similar.

Figure 3 presents the results from the matching estimator using individual-level vote intention for the House of Representatives. Since the 'treatment' (veteran status) is at the Congressional District level, the matching is done on district-level characteristics (see Section 3.1). For the same reason, standard errors are clustered at the Congressional District level.

The results show that, when focusing on all voters regardless of their party identification, the findings from the individual-level data are broadly consistent with those from aggregate data described in Section 4.1. In particular, voters are about 4 percentage points more likely to support a Democratic veteran, compared to non-veteran Democrats; and there there is no evidence that voters are any more nor less likely to support Republican veterans relative to their non-veteran co-partisans.

Figure 3 also shows the results separately for voters who identify as Independents, Democrats, or Republicans. The results show that Democratic veterans' advantage predominantly comes from increase support from Independent voters and some additional support from Republican

voters. In particular, Independent voters are 6.13 percentage points more likely to vote for a Democratic veteran. Voters who identify as Republican are 2.54 percentage points more likely to vote for a Democratic veteran, showing that the veteran status of Democratic candidates can help garner some cross-party support. Both of these effects are statistically significant at standard significance levels, and the effect among Independent voters is statistically larger than that for Republican voters ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.8$, $p = 0.0285$). Voters who identify as Democrats are slightly more likely to support Democratic veterans (compared to non-veteran Democratic candidates), but this effect is not statistically significant.

In terms of support for Republican veterans running for office, there is no evidence of differences depending on voters' party identification. Although Independent voters are 1.77 percentage points less likely to cast a vote for a Republican veteran, this effect is not statistically significant. Similarly, voters who identify as Democrats are 0.91 percentage points more likely to vote for a Republican veteran, but this effect is not statistically significant either.[14]

Figure 4 presents heterogeneous effects depending on whether the voter is part of a military family. A voter is defined as belonging to a military family if: (1) they are a veteran or current service member themselves; or (2) a member of their immediate family is a veteran or a current service member. Voters from non-military families are 5.13 percentage points more likely to support a Democratic veteran running for office; whereas voters from military families are 2.75 percentage points more likely to support a Democratic veteran. Both of these effects are statistically significant, which means that the increased electoral performance of Democratic veterans does not come exclusively from voters from military or non-military families. Furthermore, the effect among voters from non-military families is larger than for voters from military families ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.87$, $p = 0.0493$), suggesting that homophily between voters and candidates is not driving the veteran advantage (to some extent, the opposite is true). Figure A5 shows similar heterogeneous effects between veteran voters (who themselves are veterans or currently serving) and non-veteran voters. While the effect among veteran voters

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[14]The difference in effects between Independent and Democratic voters, is however, statistically significant, with $p = 0.0239$.

Figure 4: Heterogeneous Effects By Voters' Military Family
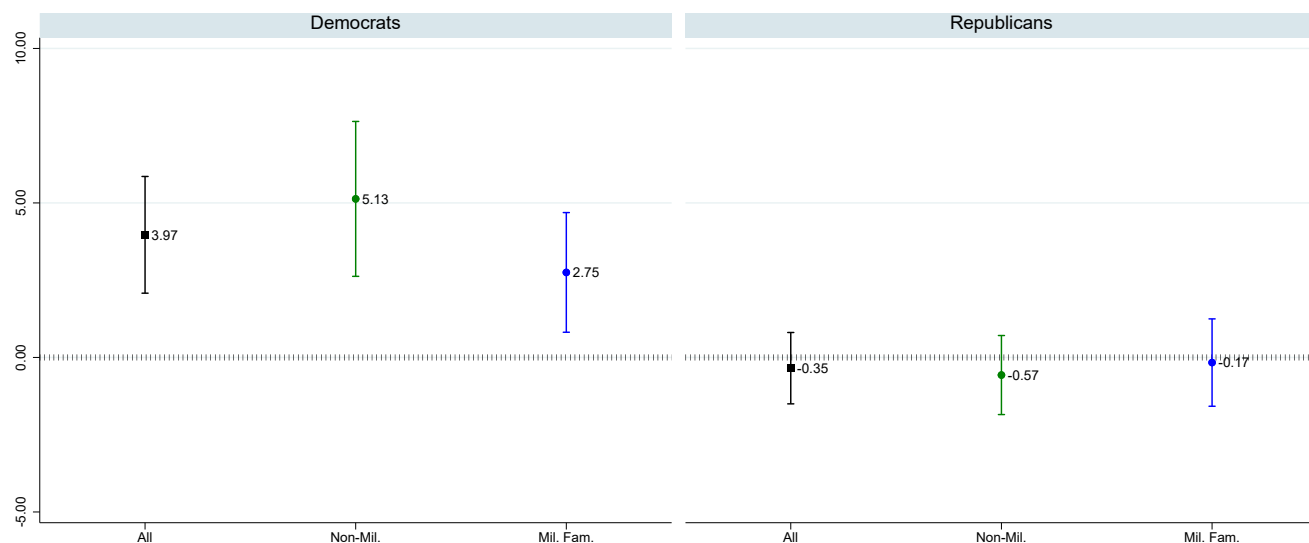
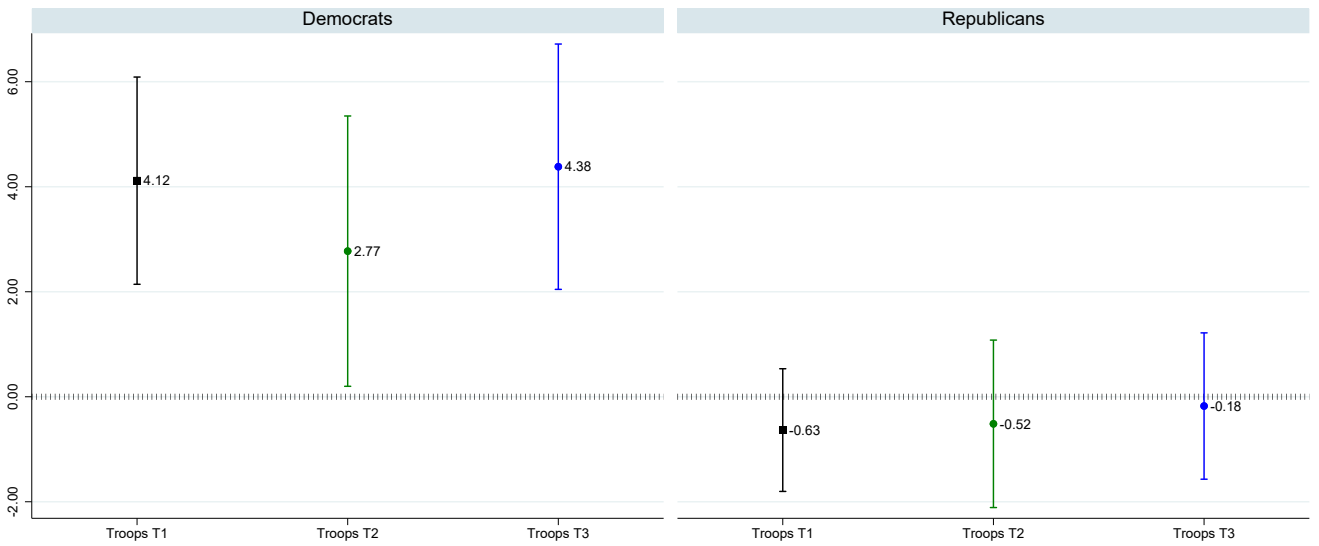*All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. All estimates come from the matching estimator.*

is smaller than among non-veteran voters, the effects are not statistically distinguishable from each other ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.38$, $p = 0.554$), mainly due to the large uncertainty in the estimate for veteran voters (which are a small proportion of all voters). For Republican candidates, there are no heterogeneous effects of any kind by voters' belonging to military families nor being veterans themselves.

Figures 5 and 6 presents heterogeneous effects depending on voters' view on the use of troops abroad and defense cuts, respectively. For the use of troops, I created three groups defined by the terciles of the number reasons respondents' agree it is appropriate to send troops abroad.[15] For defense cuts, responses come from questions asking respondents about their preferred course of action in dealing with the budget deficit: defense cuts, domestic spending cuts, or tax increases. Voters are then identified depending on whether they indicated defense cuts as the preferred option to deal with the budget deficit.

The results in the case of both use of troops abroad (Figure 5) and defense cuts (Figure 6) show no heterogeneous effects in the veteran advantage (or lack thereof). All effects for

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[15]The reasons to send troops abroad that are included are: to ensure the supply of oil, to destroy a terrorist camp, to intervene in genocide or a civil war, to assist the spread of democracy, to protect allies from foreign attack, to help the UN uphold international law.

Figure 5: Heterogeneous Effects By Voters' Views on Use of Military Force

All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. All estimates come from the matching estimator. T1, T2, and T3 refer to the terciles of the number of reasons respondents' agree it is appropriate to send troops abroad.

Figure 6: Heterogeneous Effects By Voters' Views on Defense Cuts
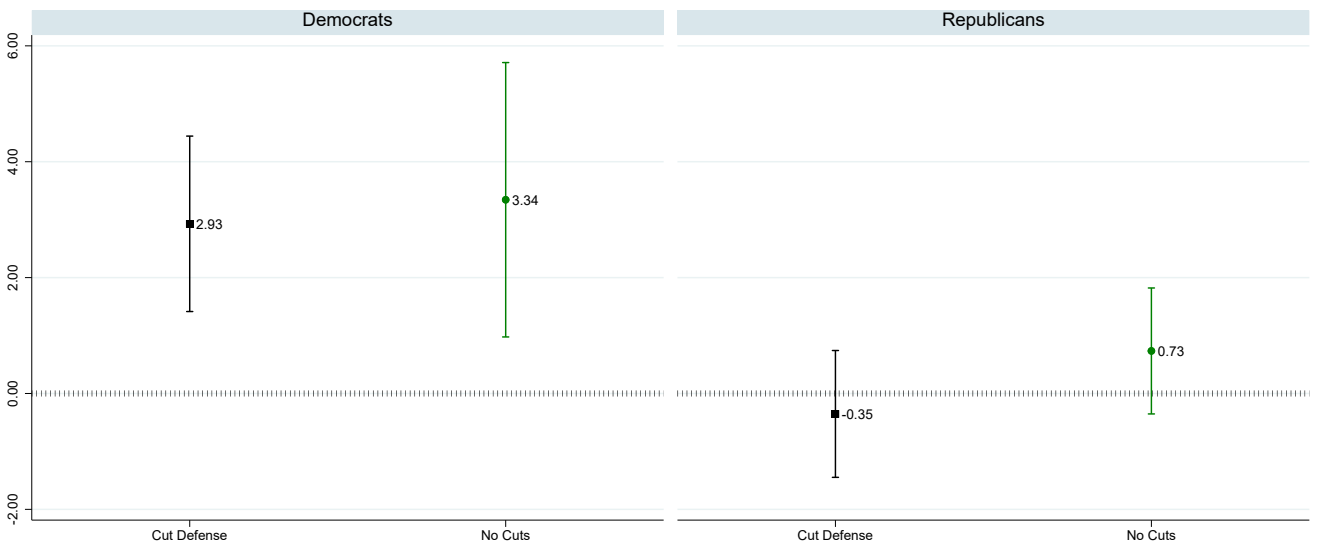
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. All estimates come from the matching estimator.

candidates of a given party are statistically indistinguishable from each other.

4.3   Veterans in Congress: Ideology and Legislative Effectiveness

The results presented in the previous two subsections show that Democratic veterans have an advantage when running for the House of Representatives, and that this advantage predominantly comes from voters who identify as Independents plus some cross-over support from voters who identify as Republican. This, in turn, suggests that Democratic veterans potentially are more ideologically moderate, or are at least perceived by voters as such.

Figure 7 presents the difference in ideological extremism for House members who are veterans relative to those who are not, for Democrats and Republicans separately. Here, extremism is defined simply as the absolute value of the Nokken-Poole ideology scores derived from roll call votes. These estimates come from a linear regression model that controls for gender, race, influential positions (chairing committees and subcommittees, membership in influential committees), fixed-effects by seniority, fixed-effects by congress, fixed-effects by year of first election to the house, the voteshare obtained in the corresponding Congress (and voteshare squared), whether the members' party is in the majority, and district characteristics. The results are presented for all member-Congresses since the 93rd Congress, as well as only since the 112th Congress (which matches time-frame used in the previous two subsections).

With both samples, the results show that Democratic and Republican House members who are veterans tend to be less ideologically extreme than their non-veteran co-partisans. But this effect is larger for Democratic veterans, than for Republican veterans. For the sample from the 93rd to 117th Congresses, Democratic veterans 0.037 less extreme than their non-veteran counterparts, an effect that is about 10.3% of the average extremism of Democratic members in the same period. Republican veterans, on the other hand, are only 0.011 less extreme, which corresponds to about 2.7% of the average extremism of Republican members in the period. When focusing only in the period between the 112th and 117th Congresses, Democratic veterans are 0.045 points less extreme (about 11% of the period average), while

Figure 7: Ideological Extremism: Veterans & Non-veterans in Congress
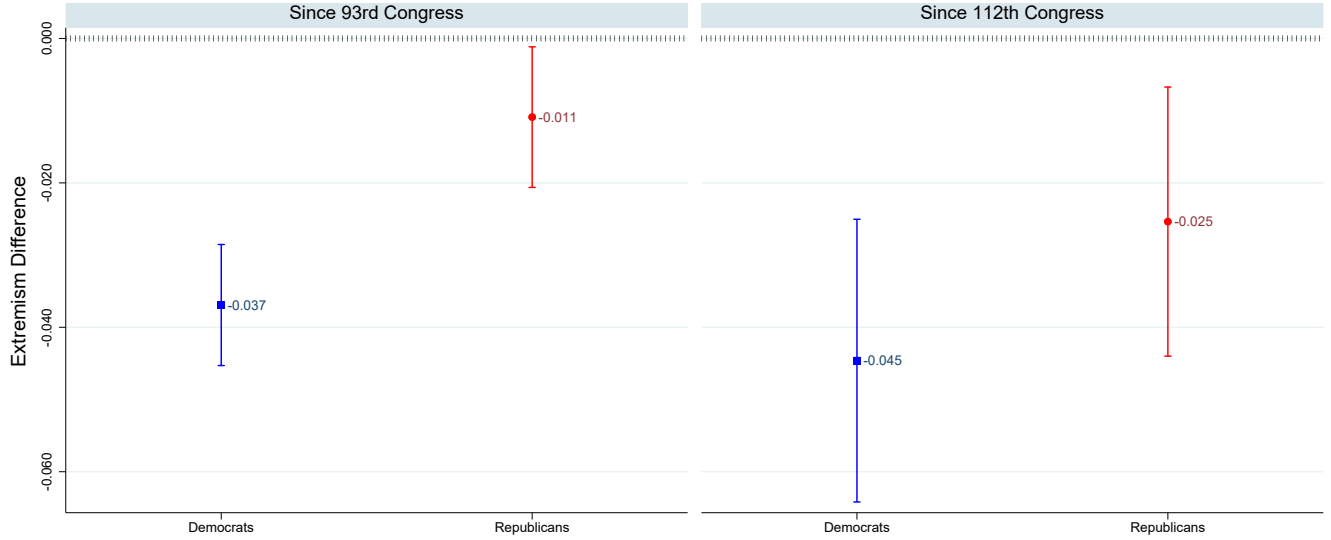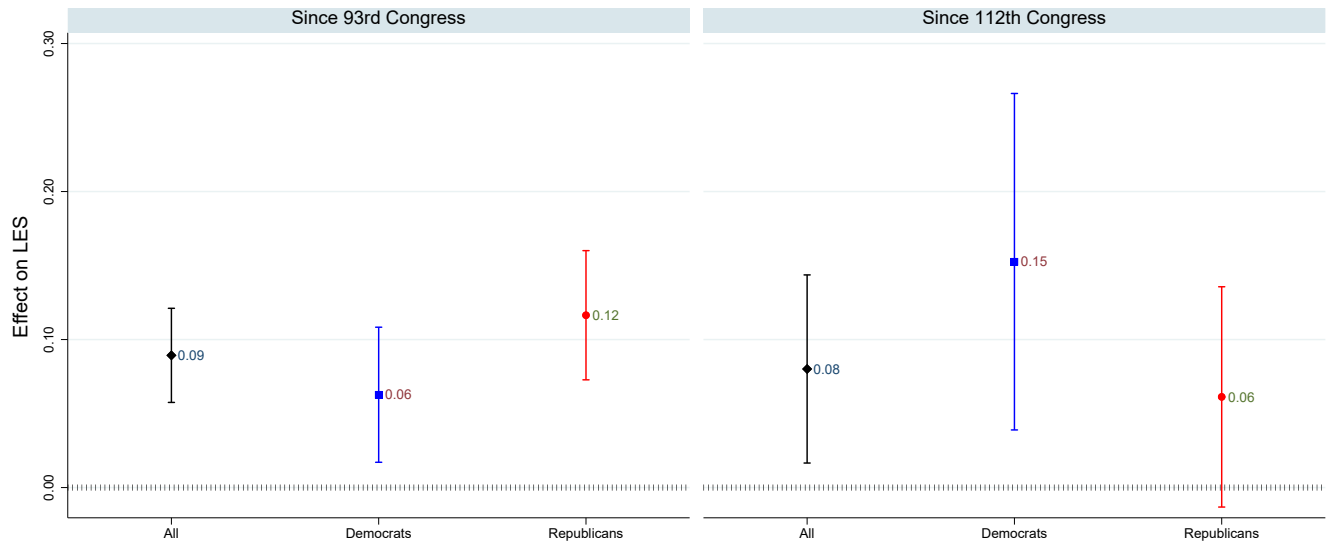

All confidence intervals are at the 95% level.

Republican veterans are 0.025 points less extreme (about 5% of the period average). Although these differences in roll-call-based ideology are relatively small, they are consistent with the notion that Democratic veterans may be perceived as more moderate candidates, which helps boost their support among Independent voters (and some cross-over from Republicans). The smaller effect for Republican veterans is also consistent with the absence of a veteran advantage among Republican candidates.

The final set of results pertain to the legislative effectiveness of veteran Representatives relative to their non-veteran counterparts. The effects are estimated using a Poisson model adjusted for over-dispersion.[16] These models control for a variety of factors that influence legislative effectiveness: fixed-effects by seniority (number of terms), prior service in a state legislature, prior service in a state legislature interacted with an indicator for the professionalism of the legislature, whether the member is in the majority, a member of leadership in the majority or in the minority party, the speaker, committee or subcommittee chair, a member of an important committee (e.g., Ways and Means), both dimensions of Nokken-Poole ideology scores, the voteshare and squared voteshare in the in election to the corresponding Congress, gender, race,

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[16]The over-dispersion parameter is set to Pearson's χ^2 divided by the degrees of freedom in the model.

and fixed-effects by Congress.

Figure 8: Legislative Effectiveness: Veterans & Non-veterans in Congress

All confidence intervals are at the 95% level.

Focusing on the period since the 93rd Congress, Figure 8 shows that veterans score 9% higher in the Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES) compare to non-veteran Representatives. This higher effectiveness of veterans is more strongly observed among Republicans (12%) than a mong Democrats (5%).

When focusing on the data covering the 112th to 117th Congresses, veterans are overall 8% more effective than non-veteran Representatives. The relative effects by party, however, are reversed, with Democratic veterans being 15% more effective than their non-veteran co-partisans in this period, while Republican veterans are 6% more effective than other Republicans (although this effect is not statistically significant).

5 Conclusion

Almost 20% of the membership of the U.S. House of Representatives is composed of military veterans, a figure well above the proportion of military veterans in the U.S. voting age population (or even the male voting age population). Conventional wisdom suggests that military veterans

should perform better in elections compared to non-veteran candidates. In fact, experimental and observational studies have found some evidence suggesting that this should be the case, particularly among Democratic candidates.

In this article, I contribute to this discussion by focusing on the last 6 House election cycles (2010-2022). In addition to providing estimates for the current time-period, this article introduces a methodological improvement to observational studies. As previously noted, veteran status is not assigned at random; instead parties, prospective candidates, donors, and primary voters decide who runs in a General Election and where. This introduces potential sources of endogeneity, which can lead to an incorrect estimation of the impact of veteran status on electoral performance. The regression discontinuity design utilized here helps ensure that veterans and non-veterans being compared are similar to each other, thereby producing more reliable estimates of the causal effect of veteran status. The matching estimates also allow for a better comparison of veteran and non-veteran candidates, providing further robustness checks, and more external validity to the RDD results.

My findings show that there is a veteran advantage among Democratic General Election candidates but not among Republican ones. This result is verified both using aggregate election data as well as individual-voter survey data. My results also show that the Democratic veteran advantage is mostly driven by increased support from Independent voters, but also some additional cross-party support from voters who identify as Republican. Among Republican candidates, there is no evidence of a veteran advantage among any subgroup of voters.

I also show that there is no evidence that belonging to a military family (or being a veteran) makes a voter more likely to support a veteran candidate for any of the two parties; in fact, while voters from military families are more likely to support Democratic veterans than Democratic non-veterans, they do so at a smaller rate than voters from non-military families (or non veteran voters). Additionally, there is no evidence that the veteran advantage enjoyed by Democratic candidates stems from increased support from voters with specific views on military and defense issues. In particular, there is no evidence that the Democratic veteran advantage varies with

voters' views on the use of troops abroad nor their views on defense cuts.

Overall, these results suggest that the electoral advantage enjoyed by Democratic veterans is likely to stem from their being perceived as more moderate candidates. Analyses of House members' ideology, measured from roll call votes using Nokken-Poole ideal points, is consistent with this. Democratic veterans are somewhat more moderate than other Democrats. While this is also true for Republicans, the differences in ideology between veteran and non-veteran Republicans are much smaller.

The results presented here are important in that they show that even in the hyper-partisan political environment of the last decade, candidate characteristics can sometimes matter, at least to some extent. Future work should consider veteran candidates running for lower offices, like state legislatures. The results observed here may also occur in those circumstances. But it is also likely that the impact of veteran status in candidates running for lower offices could be higher, partly because these races tend to occur in lower-information environments, in which an easy identifiable candidate characteristic, like veteran status, can have a larger impact on electoral performance. Finally, and relatedly, studying the impact of veteran status on primary elections success is also important in understanding the overall impact of veteran status on electoral and Congressional politics.

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Appendix A   Additional Figures and Tables

Figure A1 presents differences in district characteristics between veteran and non-veteran candidates for General Elections. As mentioned in Section 3.1 veterans are more likely to run in districts that favor Republicans in Presidential elections, districts with higher proportions of veteran voters and members of the Armed Forces, where the population is less likely to hold bachelors's and graduate degrees, where the population is whiter, and in districts located in the Southern US.

Figure A1: Differences Among Veterans and Non Veterans, all Sample
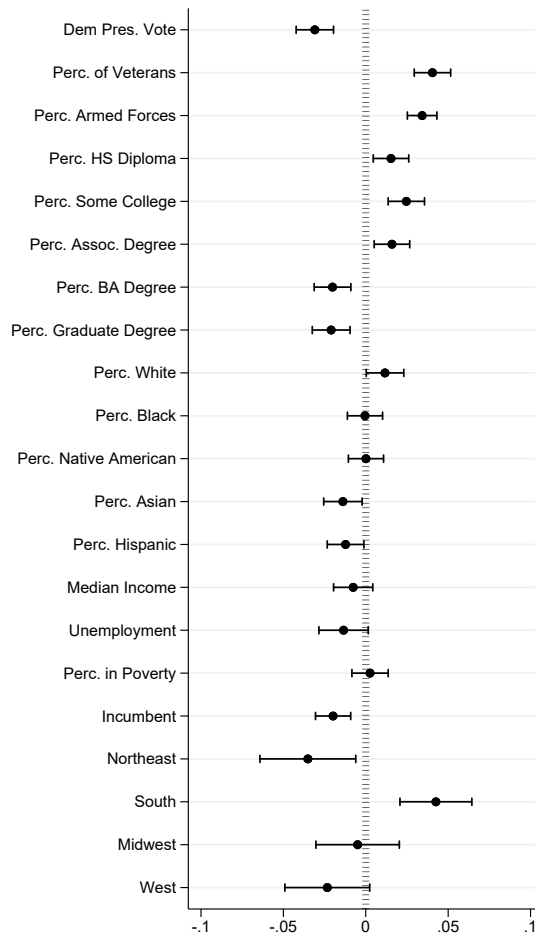
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level.

Figure A2 presents placebo tests for the RD design using its linear implementation (the results are comparable when using RD Robust, with larger standard errors). The results show

that there is no difference in district characteristics at the RD threshold. This suggests that the RD design reasonably accomplishes balance of covariates at the threshold, which is a necessary condition for the RD estimates to have a valid causal interpretation.

Figure A2: RDD Placebo Outcomes
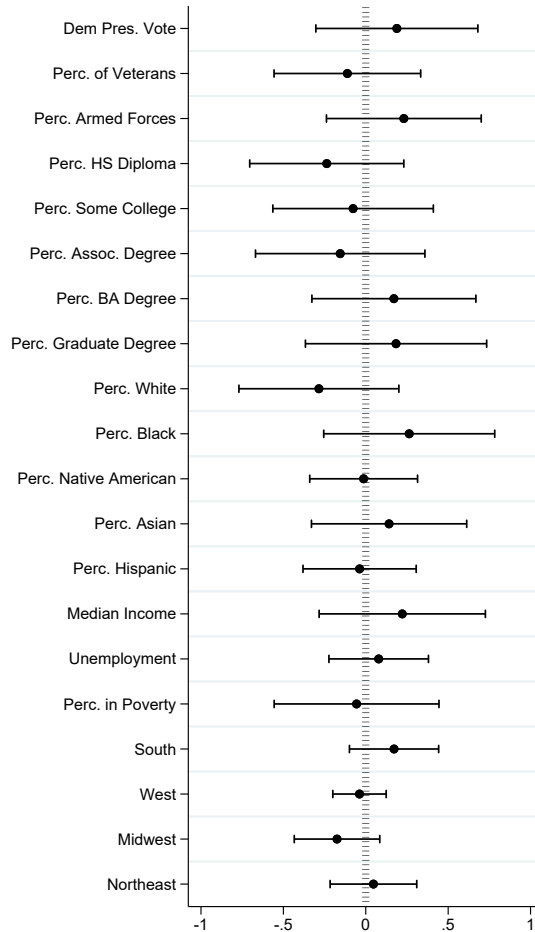
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. All estimates come from the linear RDD specification.

Figure A3 shows the McCrary density manipulation test, which aims to determine whether there is a discontinuity in the distribution of the score variable (margin of victory in the primary, in this case). A discontinuity would suggest that some types of candidates are more or less capable of being on one side of the threshold, which would indicate that candidates on each side of the threshold are not really comparable. The results show that there is no evidence of a discontinuity at the threshold. The test statistic is -0.369, with a p-value of 0.712.[17]

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[17]The results lead to the same conclusion when testing for a density discontinuity separately for Democratic

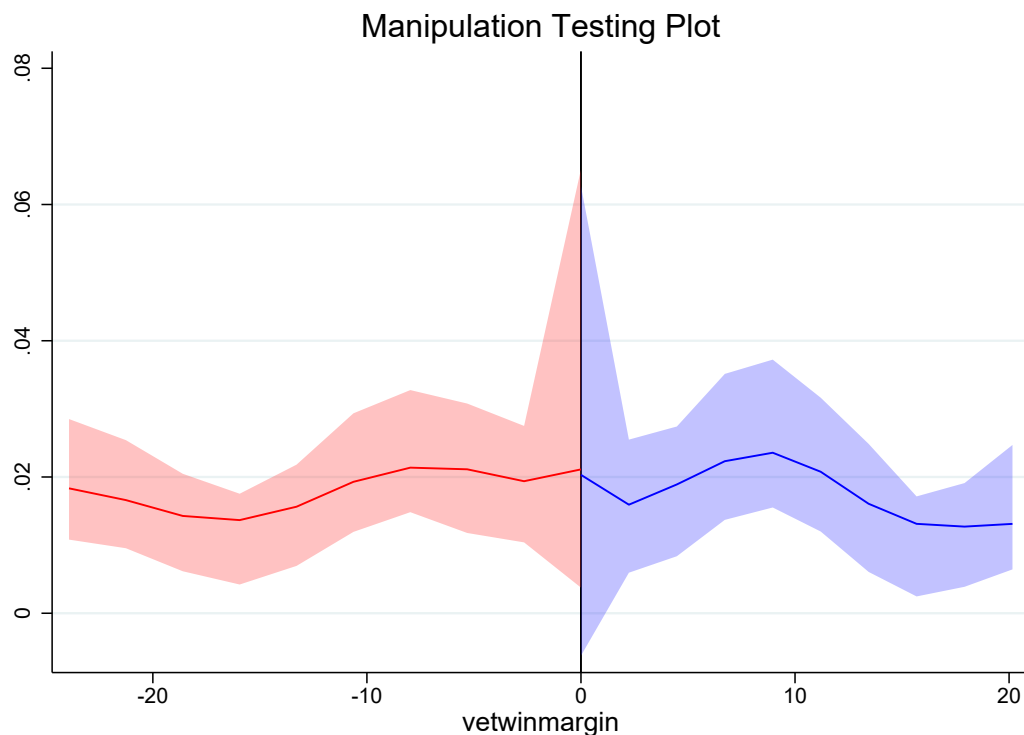Figure A3: McCrary Density Manipulation Plot

Manipulation Testing Plot

Figure A4 presents estimates from the linear RDD model using aggregate data for three different outcome variables. The first panel looks at voteshare (already reported in Figure 2). The second panel looks instead at the number of votes cast for the candidate. The third panel looks at the probability of the candidate winning the race. The effects for number of votes are in-line with those for voteshare. Democratic veterans enjoy an advantage of 13,562 votes compared to Democratic non-veterans. Considering that the average number of votes for a candidate in the RD subsample is about 127,000 this amounts to a 10.5% higher voteshare, which is somewhat larger 7.3% estimated from voteshare directly. It is possible that this difference may be explained by higher turnout.

In terms of the probability of winning, the estimate is larger for Democratic candidates (8.72%), than for Republican candidates (1.89%), but neither is statistically significant. In fact, both these estimates have very large standard errors. There are a number of reasons why we may not observe a higher chance of winning despite increased voteshare: (1) partisan

and Republican candidates.

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Figure A4: Linear RDD for Three Different Outcomes
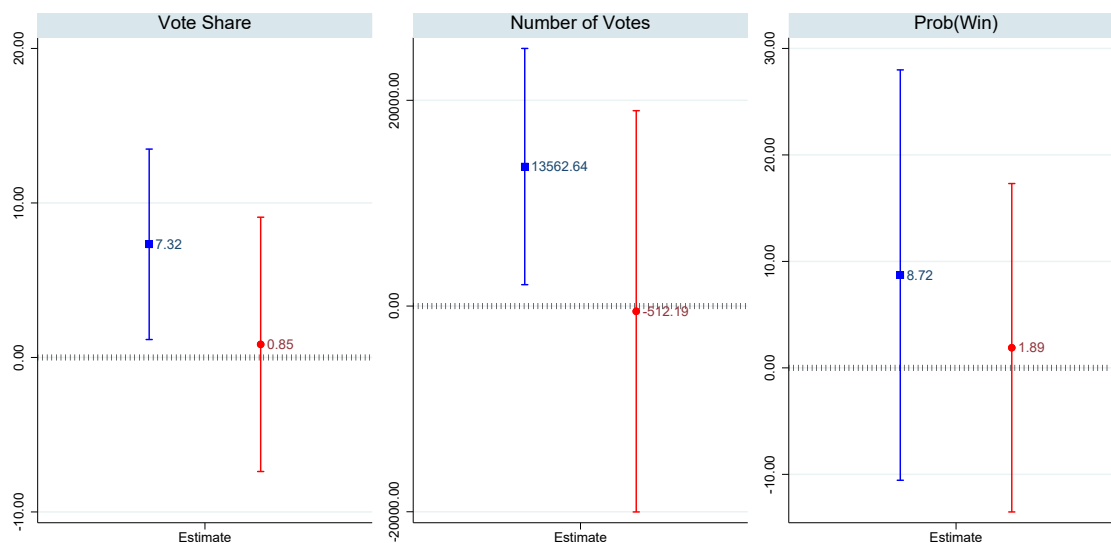
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level.

gerrymandering has made most districts safe, so that a better or worse performance in terms of voteshare may not be sufficient to overcome a district's partisan lean, (2) the RD design focuses on races with competitive primaries, which are more likely to occur among challengers than among incumbents (who are more likely to win), and (3) the sample size is relatively small, especially when considering the aforementioned factors.

Figure A5 presents heterogeneous results based on the individual level data (using the matching estimator) depending on whether the individual voter is his or herself a military veteran (or current member of the military). The results are similar to those presented for military families in Figure 4, although the standard errors for veteran voters are larger (there are fewer veteran voters than voters from military families). Possibly because of this larger standard errors, the evidence does not show a statistically significant difference between veteran and non-veteran voters.

Figure A5: By Voters' Individual Veteran Status
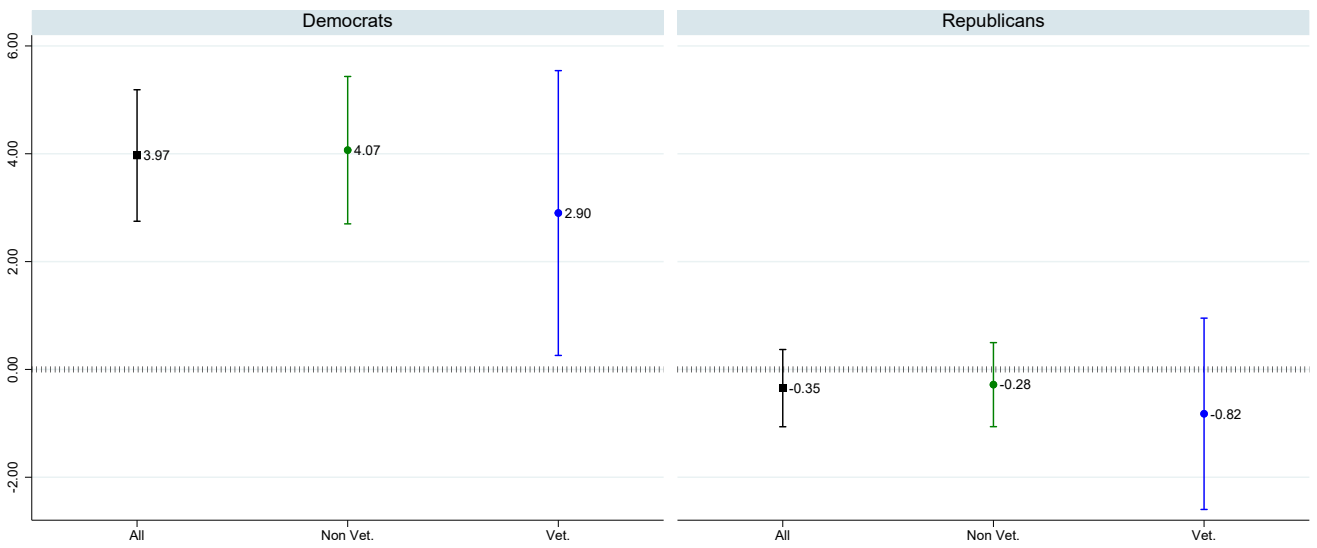
All confidence intervals are at the 95% level. Estimates come from the matching specification.