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Senators in Presidential Elections

What is the track record of senators who run for president? Do they usually win?*

The historical record offers good news and bad news for Senator Kerry and his supporters.^[1]

Let's start with the good news. There have been 54 presidential elections since the election of 1789. In 15 of those contests, a sitting or former senator won the White House. So having "U.S. senator" on one's resume is usually a good thing.

Also worth noting is that senators, historically, have made up the largest pool of presidential contenders. Sitting or former senators have comprised one-third of all candidates in primary and general elections. (The next closest category is governors: less than a quarter of candidates have come from their ranks.) Some presidential primaries -- 1988, for example -- have sported a number of senators duking it out with each other. The conspicuous presence of so many senators running for president has led to the notion that the U.S. Senate is the "mother of presidents," "the presidential incubator," "the presidential nursery," and the like.



But the picture becomes less rosy when other historical trends are factored in. The bad news for Senator Kerry is that Americans have not elected a president with senate experience in more than 30 years. (The last was Richard Nixon.) Not one of our last six presidents ever served in the Senate.

Moreover, the prospects of winning the White House fall dramatically if you are a *sitting* senator, as John Kerry is. Only two jumped that hurdle -- Warren Harding in 1920 and John F. Kennedy in 1960. Coincidentally, neither finished his term as president.^[2] If John Kerry is elected in November, he would be only the third sitting senator to go directly from the Senate to the White House.

Chances of winning in November improve if there is an interval between serving in the Senate and running for president. So John Kerry might want to consider doing something else -- anything else -- for a while. It is instructive that Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson did not go straight to the White House from the Senate, but took a detour via the Naval Observatory.

The fact is, most senators who've run for president have lost. Some have lost big. Since the mid-1960s, several candidates with "U.S. senator" on their resume suffered humiliating defeats: Barry Goldwater in 1964, George McGovern in 1972, Walter Mondale in 1984, Bob Dole in 1996.

By contrast, governors running for president tend not to get trounced. (There have been notable exceptions: George H. W. Bush buried Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts in 1988, winning 426 of 537 electoral votes.) Perhaps it is because senators are by temperament and experience legislators, not executives. Governors bring executive leadership to the presidency, and the public has more confidence in them to be strong leaders.

So the overall historical trends are not favorable to someone in Senator Kerry's position. His quest for the presidency in 2004 may prove Quixotic.

(Question from Lauren W. of Fort Wayne, Indiana)

* Full question: It looks as if a U.S. senator, John Kerry, is going to be the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004. What is the track record of senators who run for president? Do they usually win?

^[1] I am indebted to Harvard political science professor Barry C. Burden, "United States Senators as Presidential Candidates," *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (Spring 2002): 81-103. Also see Christopher DeMuth, "Governors (and Generals) Rule," *American Enterprise* 15 (January/February 2004): 26-29.

^[2] James A. Garfield almost succeeds in complicating this little survey. For one thing, he was the only sitting congressman to go directly from the U.S. House of Representatives to the White House. However, in 1880, the year he ran for president, he was also elected to represent Ohio in the U.S. Senate. But what is it about association with the Senate? Like Harding and Kennedy, Garfield did not finish his term in office; he was assassinated and had the second shortest tenure (about 200 days) of any U.S. president.