

From Bullets to Ballots? The Role of Veterans in Contemporary Elections

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Abstract

While candidates frequently seek veterans' support, relatively little research exists on the behavior of veterans as a group. Military veterans account for about 12.7% of the U.S. population and display characteristics such as a heightened sense of patriotism that suggest they should be disproportionately politically active. Moreover, owing to their shared socializing experiences, there is good reason to think that veterans might vote as a bloc. Indeed, this expectation about the veterans' vote and civic engagement has become conventional wisdom among journalists, particularly those covering races in states with large veteran populations. This paper seeks to increase our understanding of veterans' preferences by examining whether military veterans vote as a cohesive bloc and whether veteran candidates more likely to gain their support. Examining thirty-six presidential, gubernatorial and senatorial contests for which data on citizens' and candidates' veteran status is available, our results suggest that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the answer to both of these questions is no.

INTRODUCTION

From George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower to Andrew Jackson and Teddy Roosevelt, veterans have long held a privileged place in American politics. Among candidates, military service is thought to imbue many of the characteristics perceived as essential to leadership. Veterans are seen as patriotic, honest, and as strong leaders willing to sacrifice themselves on their country's behalf. Among the citizenry, political strategists value veterans because their shared history of service makes them especially likely to be politically active. Veterans exhibit characteristics such as a heightened sense of patriotism and greater attention to foreign policy issues to veterans (Jennings and Markus 1977; Teigen 2007). Moreover, appealing to veterans may redound well with the public as a whole, the vast majority of whom seem to appreciate veterans' sacrifice and public service, and who are sensitive to at least some issues related to the military.¹

Extant research suggests that veterans can influence elections either by running for office, or by casting votes that can influence election outcomes—a phenomenon we refer to as the “veterans’ vote.” The veterans’ vote refers to a cohesive group that votes as a bloc owing to shared (military) experiences, socialization, interests, and outlook. Investigation of the existence of a veterans’ vote promises to enhance our understanding of political campaigns by determining whether veterans have shared attitudes and a shared voting preference.

Veterans are actively courted in electoral campaigns partly because they are numerous and perceived as especially likely to participate. In close elections, cohesive groups of reliable voters are disproportionately valuable because they are capable of

influencing electoral outcomes. Moreover, veterans are disproportionately located in swing states and districts and in many places the veteran population is as large or larger than many racial ethnic, or religious minorities. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, veterans constitute at least 10% of the civilian population in every state in the union. In the key presidential swing states of Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania, for example, veterans constitute 15%, 14% and 14%, respectively, of the civilian population over age 18.² Although candidates in national, state, and local elections seek veterans' support, little research exists that examines their voting behavior.³

This article investigates veterans' political attitudes and behavior in order to evaluate whether the conventional wisdom is correct.⁴ We begin by explaining why we might expect a veterans' vote and investigate whether veterans share background characteristics and political preferences that might give rise to shared voting behavior. We find that veterans have slightly higher socio-economic status and, not surprisingly, are more Republican and conservative than the public as a whole. Then, we examine whether a candidate's veteran status influences their vote decision. Our results call the

¹ For instance, Karol and Miguel (2007) find that war casualties adversely affected Bush's vote share in 2004.

² The 2000 U.S. Census identifies the 10 states with the largest number of veterans as: CA, FL, TX, NY, PA, OH, IL, MI, NC, and VA. At least 5 of these are seen as swing states.

³ For an examination of veterans' behavior in 2004 see Teigen (2007).

⁴ The term "veterans" refers to those who self-identify as having served in the armed forces. Examination of veterans' behavior and preferences by branch of service are beyond the scope of this study though we note that there is good reason to expect differences across branch of service and time period served, and especially for Guardsmen, differences within a branch across time. Moreover, these data are unavailable for all but those currently serving in the armed forces.

existence of a veterans' vote into question. Controlling for background characteristics, we find no evidence that veterans are more likely to participate or coalesce around a particular candidate.

Why a Veterans' Vote?

A conventional wisdom holds that veterans vote as a cohesive bloc. In virtually any major race in which a veteran runs, the media raise the specter of such a vote (e.g., Connolly 1999; Meredith 1999; Kirkpatrick 2004; VandeHei 2004; Shear 2004). Indeed, there are a number of reasons to think these journalists correct. There is a well-documented history of veterans banding together to influence policy. Moreover, studies of political behavior suggest that voters with similar backgrounds and life experiences tend to have similar political beliefs and engage in similar political behavior (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954). Mettler (2005), for instance, holds that veterans have higher levels of civic competence, one implication of which might be increased levels of political participation. A shared outlook would be unsurprising given that veterans have spent "...years imbedded in an insulated institution that makes specific efforts to inculcate its members with patriotism, esprit de corps, conformity, and other values" (Teigen 2007, 414). Indeed, a candidate highlighting their military service might be seen as engaging in homestyle, in an attempt to impart to a significant minority of their citizenry that 'I am one of you' (Fenno 1978).

Research on social identity suggests that veterans' common socialization and life experiences likely map into shared group or social identities that may lie latent until activated (Turner et al., 1987, Huddy 2001). Campaigns or current events can activate such identities and induce veterans to vote as a cohesive bloc.

Politicians seem to regard veterans as valuable and seek to appeal to them either directly, through policy appeals, or indirectly by publicizing their own veteran status (or their opponent's lack of military service). Each of these factors suggests that veterans might display increased attitude cohesion and thus be especially politically valuable.

Veterans' Preferences

The shared sense of patriotism and civic duty thought to motivate military service is also thought to increase levels of political participation. Research shows that because of their predisposition toward public service, veterans are more likely to be politically active (Sherif and Cantril 1947; Whyte 1956; Turner et al. 1987; Leal 1999; Teigen 2006). For instance, Teigen (2006) demonstrates that on average, veterans turn out at slightly higher rates than non-veterans. Additionally, African-American veterans are more likely to engage in political behavior (Ellison 1992). Thus it seems possible that shared background and political preferences might affect veterans' political behavior.

Conventional determinants of vote-choice could also shape a veterans' vote. Party identification is the strongest determinant of vote-choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Flanagan and Zingale 2006); it is believed that veterans are more likely to align with the Republican Party, particularly on issues of security and defense (Eliperin 2003). Veteran elites, or veterans who serve in government, have cohesive opinions on the subjects of defense and military action. Gelpi and Feaver (2002) find that as the legislative and executive branches include more veteran elites, the probability that military action will be initiated decreases.⁵ Others find that veterans possess shared

⁵ However, should a military dispute commence, military elites will favor a larger, more unrestricted use of force in resolving the conflict. This provides evidence for a gap between veteran and civilian opinions,

preferences on some social issues. For instance, returning Viet Nam veterans were more liberal than the general public on the issues of marijuana legalization and premarital cohabitation (Johnson 1976). Furthermore, Schreiber (1979) finds that veteran status contributes to a favorable view of the military but fails to have a significant effect on other political preferences. Finally, we note that research suggests that overseas military ballots provided George W. Bush's margin of victory in the 2000 presidential election (Imai and King 2004).

It is also believed that veterans are more likely to support a candidate who is a veteran or a decorated soldier (Scribner 1983). Meredith (1999) depicts veterans as wary of supporting a candidate without a military background, and veterans describe combat experience as an "extremely important" indicator of a candidate's ability to handle national defense and sympathize with the needs of the military and veterans. Teigen (2007) observed that in 2004, veterans had more positive affect toward prominent military veterans John McCain and Colin Powell.

A candidate's veteran status might also affect the perception of the public as well. The general public perceives veterans as experts on military and foreign policy, with incumbent veterans receiving an increase in votes following a declaration of war (Regins, Gaddie, and Lockerbie 1995). However, veteran status is not a silver bullet. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both won elections against decorated veterans, despite having questionable (or nonexistent) military records. Additionally, the electoral failures of George H.W. Bush, John McCain, and John Kerry cast doubt on the public's propensity to support veterans.

particularly in foreign policy and defense. Gelpi and Feaver's analysis is restricted to veteran elites, not

Social Identity

Beyond explanations of veterans' history of activism and shared political preferences, their shared values and development of a social identity resulting from shared socialization in the armed services provide a basis for a veterans' vote. Those motivated to fulfill military duty presumably share values related to patriotism and civic duty.

Social Identity Theory holds that individuals develop identities in response to major socializing events that occur throughout their lives (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Individuals develop multiple, overlapping identities in response to important socializing events occurring throughout the course of their lives. Identities generally remain latent until something occurs to make them salient, and thus are constantly 'reshuffled' in response to one's environment, becoming active only when stimulated. Since the experience of serving in the military is a crucial socializing episode, one or more common social identities might also underpin veterans' political beliefs and attitudes (Terry, Hogg and Duck 1999). In this way, veterans might be expected to form one or more common identities and sets of shared values that relate to them regardless of their reasons for joining the military (volunteerism or conscription). Politicians might take advantage of a common identity by appealing to veterans and activating veterans' latent group identity. This can be done when candidates remind voters who are veterans of the candidates' military record or through patriotic or veteran-specific appeals. Consequently, once activated, veterans should be more likely to agree on which issues

veterans in the general public.

are important (such as defense or veterans' benefits) and on how government should handle these issues.

It is important to note, however, that as veterans' experiences vary dramatically, so too will the identities that veterans develop in response to these experiences. While a number of common socializing experiences and predispositions may lead to shared attitudes, the differing experiences of veterans from different eras, in different conflicts, or even in different branches of service will also almost certainly lead to the development of multiple identities that may not be shared across these groups. For example, while volunteers for both WWII and Viet Nam doubtlessly have multiple identities in common, the different experiences of these conflicts and the politics surrounding them can be expected to leave a number of very different identities that pertain to their unique military service. Thus, veterans should not necessarily be seen as monolithic unless common identities are activated. These differences imply that a veterans' vote might only be expected under conditions in which the common, shared, identities are salient.

Current Events and Campaigning

Given the size of veterans as a voting bloc, contemporary appeals to veterans are the result of electoral competitiveness which forces politicians to court and mobilize veteran voters as a key constituency. Such appeals provide another reason to expect a cohesive veterans' vote. By directly appealing to veterans, or trumpeting their own status as veterans, candidates may activate the latent identities and preferences associated with military service. As a result, appeals to veterans are no longer directed at the veterans lobby through preferential legislative outcomes, but instead directly toward voters during campaigns. Recent presidential elections are illustrative.

In 2000, both Al Gore and George W. Bush courted veterans with pro-veteran statements and patriotic sentiment (Connolly 1999; Meredith 1999). Al Gore's promise of an additional billion dollars for veterans' health care was combined with reminiscences of his "buddies in the Army" and an "ironclad commitment" that the United States will continue to be a strong global force.

In their 2004 presidential campaigns, both John Kerry and George W. Bush aggressively targeted veterans. John Kerry's "honor guard" of fellow Vietnam veterans traveled alongside the Massachusetts senator as early as the New Hampshire Primary, making bold claims against George W. Bush that were too extreme to be stated by Kerry himself (Dionne 2004). Kerry's veteran campaign travelers and appeals to veterans at the Democratic National Convention actually prompted a Republican memorandum to Party Chairman Ed Gillespie urging the party to give veterans "a prominent place at the convention" (Kirkpatrick 2004).

Appeals to veterans can occur through both positive campaigning and negative attacks. John Kerry's (in)famous "reporting for duty" speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention would be an example of the former, while the 527 Group, Swift Boat Veterans For Truth's Anti-Kerry advertisements and the well-documented characterization of Bill Clinton as a draft dodger would be an example of the latter.⁶

⁶ We note that appeals to veterans likely resound well with the electorate as a whole, which seems to value the positive affective characteristics associated with veteran status that we discuss in the introduction to this paper. These characteristics include leadership, honesty, integrity, competence, among others (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).

The Diversity of Veterans

To this point much of our discussion has focused on reasons why veterans vote as a bloc. However, as we have briefly noted in our discussion of social identity, there are also reasons to question the logic underlying this conventional wisdom. While the differing experiences of different periods of service in different branches of the military may lead to the creation of differing social identities, the background characteristics of those entering the military and the reason for entering the armed forces may vary substantially across individuals. Veterans who were pressed into service via the draft may have fundamentally different values than those who volunteered, for instance.⁷ We may also see socioeconomic differences in those joining the military. While some may join for reasons of patriotism, others may view the military as providing economic and educational opportunities that might otherwise be unattainable. Such distinctions have potentially important implications for our analyses as we might expect less homogeneity in both veterans' political behavior and preferences, than the previous sections might suggest.

Summary of Expectations

To summarize, while veterans are hardly monolithic, there are many reasons why we might see a cohesive veterans' vote. Veterans have a distinguished pedigree of political activity and likely share many common values and socializing experiences. These shared characteristics may motivate veterans' political participation and influence their policy preferences and their vote choice. Finally, politicians seem to pay special

⁷ Indeed, Teigen's (2006) results depict variation in propensity to vote depending on the era in which one served. Unfortunately, owing to data limitations and the small sizes of the samples employed here we are unable to further explore these hypotheses in the context of vote choice.

attention to veterans and appeal to them as a cohesive group. Candidates' mobilization efforts should further serve to motivate veterans to vote as a bloc.

Despite these expectations, previous research on veterans is indicative of the diversity described in the previous section. For instance, while veterans are believed to be more conservative and more likely to support the Republican Party, particularly on defense issues, Johnson (1976) finds veterans to be more socially liberal. Also, although veterans should be more likely to vote for veteran candidates because of their shared group identity, non-veterans have defeated high-profile veterans in recent elections even in places with large numbers of veterans (e.g., Max Cleland in Georgia in 2002). Some scholars conceptualize veterans as being more "civically competent" stemming from their previous interactions with the government, particularly lobbying in favor of the G.I. Bill (Mettler 2005). This increased civic competence should positively affect political participation. Finally, Teigen (2006) finds that on the whole, veterans are very slightly more likely to vote.

The preceding discussion suggests that we should expect veterans to exhibit several characteristics. First, to the extent there is a veterans' vote, veterans should exhibit both some shared background characteristics that might give rise to shared preferences. Second, when veterans participate, they should coalesce behind the candidate who takes their positions on their issues. This is generally believed to be the Republican Party's candidates, who generally have a more conservative stance on national security issues. Third, veterans should be more likely to support one of their own by voting for veteran candidates over non-veteran candidates. In sum, we should observe a cohesive veterans' vote that favors either those candidates who espouse policy positions that are likely to be supported by veterans, or veteran candidates. When

controlling for other factors such as age, race, income, and party identification, veteran status should have an observable and significant influence on vote choice.

Demography, Participation and Preferences

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the degree to which veterans act as a coherent voting bloc.⁸ More specifically, we are interested in examining two questions. First, do veterans have shared attitudes and preferences? Second, do veterans have a shared voting preference?

Unfortunately, our ability to answer these questions is limited due to the unavailability of data. For example, the largest national studies of public opinion such as the American National Election Study and the General Social Survey only rarely ask questions that allow us to determine whether or not a respondent served in the military.⁹ Other studies, such as the Annenberg National Election Study (2000), ask only if a veteran lives in the household. To overcome these limitations we rely on a wide variety of sources including the Current Population Survey, surveys done by the Pew Foundation, National Election Exit Polls (and its predecessors) as well as private polls conducted by Opinion Dynamics. We use these data to describe veterans' political demographics, and whether or not they vote as a group.¹⁰

Historically, the bulk of the voting behavior literature suggests that vote choice, and political predispositions have their roots in individuals' political and social background characteristics (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). In order

⁸ For classifying politicians, we define veterans as any current or former member of the main branches of the armed forces, National Guard or Reserves. Respondents who self-identify are classified as veterans.

⁹ Though the GSS has occasionally asked whether the respondent belongs to any veterans organizations.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, we are unable to examine the degree to which their attitudes cohere across issues.

to investigate the veterans' vote, we therefore begin by briefly examining the degree to which veterans' background characteristics and political preferences differ from the public at large. Doing so allows us to evaluate whether veterans actually exhibit a distinctive shared outlook, an important assumption on which the conventional wisdom would seem to crucially depend. If veterans are no different than the electorate as a whole, we would expect any cohesive vote based on shared policy preferences or outlook be minimal, though it might still be stimulated by a candidate's veteran status.

Political Demography

Our data describing the demographic characteristics of veterans are drawn from the 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census while data on political characteristics are obtained from the Pew 2004 mid-October poll. According to the CPS about 11.6% of citizens have served in the armed forces. Demographically veterans seem to have slightly higher socio-economic status than does the non-veteran population.

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 compares the demographic characteristics of the veteran and non-veteran populations. Whereas the level of education and proportion that is African American are similar across these groups, we see a relatively large difference in the proportion of veterans who are Hispanic. Veterans as a group tend to be about 12 years older on average and earn slightly higher incomes than do non-veterans. Least surprising, although females account for over half the population, they account for just over 6% of veterans. However, the political differences are starker.

[Table 2 here]

Table 2 shows that politically, veterans tend to be more Republican and conservative than the public as a whole. Overall, 52.5% of veterans identify as Republicans, as opposed to 43.2% of the non-veteran population. Conversely, only 39.6% of veterans self identify as Democrats as contrasted by 47.1% of the non-veteran population. The gap in party identification is even more pronounced when examining ideological self-identification. Whereas 51.6% of veterans identify as conservative as opposed to 40.3% of non-veterans, veterans are about five points less likely to be moderate or liberal. Given these preferences, it is surprising that only 54.1% of veterans voted for the GOP candidate George Bush for president in 2004. While we can only speculate, evidence demonstrating that Iraq war casualties diminished his margins among the public as a whole (Karol and Miguel 2007), might have adversely and disproportionately affected his standing among veterans.

The Veterans' Vote

Given that veterans have slightly higher socio-economic status, and are more likely to be male than are non-veterans, it is unsurprising that they are also more Republican and conservative. Certainly, these findings are consistent with the idea of a veterans' vote based on shared political preferences. In this section, we examine whether veterans celebrated status as a bloc of voters who vote based on their shared military experience is deserved.

A common refrain among journalists during races in which one candidate seems to have an advantage based on his or her military service is that he or she is playing to the veterans' vote. A 2004 *Washington Post* piece describes John Kerry's advantages among veterans in the state of Virginia: "Kerry's profile as a Vietnam veteran and his work as a senator on behalf of veterans will appeal to many of the state's 750,000 or so residents

who were once in the military” (Shear 2004). However, in the previous section we have seen that, at least in 2004, veterans were more Republican and conservative than non-veterans. The question we need to investigate is whether or not the shared socialization and background characteristics translates into support for a particular candidate above and beyond the support that this group would provide based solely on its ideology, partisanship and other socio-economic characteristics.

In general we can think of two conditions under which a veterans’ vote might occur. First, owing to Republicans’ traditional ownership of the security issue (e.g. Petrocik 1996) we might expect veterans to vote for Republicans, at least in presidential elections in which security concerns are most often visible. Second, we might expect veterans to support candidates who are themselves veterans when candidates’ shared group identification is most visible. In lower-level races, such effects would most likely be manifest when a veteran runs against a non-veteran.

We can investigate the veterans’ vote under both of these conditions. First, we can see whether or not a veterans’ vote is manifest in presidential-level races. Second, we can collect data on lower-level races for which we observe variation in whether or not candidates were veterans. We might expect to observe differential effects based on whether the veteran candidate is a Republican. More specifically, we expect that either the cue of GOP party affiliation via issue ownership or a candidate’s military service might serve to activate a latent social identity among veterans. We refer to these predictions as the *Party Ownership Hypothesis* and the *Veteran Candidate Hypothesis*, respectively.

Presidential election data are available from the 1992 and 2004 that query respondents as to their veteran status. Unfortunately no other national studies of elections

allow us to examine the effect of veteran status on the vote choice.¹¹ To examine whether veteran status has an independent impact on the vote, we build a model in which socio-economic and political predispositions affect vote choice. The dependent variables in these models are the vote for the Republican candidates for president. In 1992, the GOP candidate was incumbent George H.W. Bush, a World War II fighter pilot who ran against noted Democratic non-veteran, and alleged draft dodger, Bill Clinton. This race is especially useful for examination because it pits a veteran Republican versus a non-veteran Democrat, so whatever mechanism (whether the Party Ownership or Veteran Candidate Hypothesis) is thought to drive the veterans' vote should be evident here.¹² Data from 1992 are obtained from the Voter Research and Surveys General Election Exit Polls 1992.

The second case for which data are available is the 2004 election, which pitted incumbent Republican and National Guard veteran George W. Bush against Viet Nam war hero John F. Kerry. Bush's candidacy was marred by documentation alleging that he rarely showed up for duty in the Alabama National Guard. At the time, a position in the National Guard was seen as a way of avoiding military service and the risk of being sent to Viet Nam (Lardner and Romano 1999; Nagourney and Wilgoren 2004). The cues concerning Kerry may also have been somewhat muddled as Kerry's military credentials were challenged by groups making independent expenditures that called into question his actions in Viet Nam (Wilgoren 2004). Additionally, one prominent veteran, Dexter

¹¹ The 2004 American National Election Study also allows for evaluation of the 2004 vote choice. The results are substantively identical to those presented herein.

¹² We re-estimated this model with the dependent variable recoded as a vote for Bill Clinton because both Perot and Bush are veterans. The results are substantively unchanged.

Lehtinen, paid for advertisements in the *Army Times* that questioned Kerry's patriotism because of claims he made about American war crimes in testimony before Congress during the course of the war (*Army Times* 2004). However, it should be noted that Bush went into the election perceived as the stronger candidate on military issues (VandeHei 2004). Consequently, this race gives us less-clear predictions about whether a veterans' vote might be expected. Data for 2004 are obtained from the 2004 Pew November Re-interview Poll.

In examining one's vote choice we would like to account for other factors that might motivate veterans' political behavior. To do so, we develop statistical models that allow us to control for the impact of alternative influences on vote choice (e.g., Miller and Shanks 1996).¹³ *Partisanship* reflects self-placement on a 5-point scale where higher scores correspond to stronger Republican identification. *Conservatism* corresponds to ideological self-placement on a 5-point scale. Higher scores correspond to increased conservatism. *Latino* and *Black* indicate whether a respondent identifies as a member of that ethnic or racial group. *Income* and *Education* account for varying levels of socio-economic status, which are widely shown to be associated with increased political participation (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). *Age* accounts for the fact that older individuals are more likely to participate (Milibrath 1965; Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974). *Female* accounts for the different participation levels women exhibit (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). *Veteran* is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent reports having served in the armed

¹³ Of course, it is also possible that military service influences one's partisanship or other socio-economic characteristics. Investigation of these relationships is beyond the scope of this paper.

forces or reserves. *Attend* is a 6-category variable indicating the frequency with which one attends church.¹⁴

[Table 3 here]

The results seen in Table 3 provide no evidence to suggest that veteran status exerted an independent effect on vote choice in the 1992 or 2004 presidential elections. Overall, the statistical results presented above are generally consistent with observed and expected patterns in the electorate. All of the demographic, political and socio-economic variables are correctly signed. However, we should caution that the magnitudes are not always comparable because of coding differences across surveys. Whereas the lack of findings for a veterans' vote might be unsurprising for the 2004 election given the potential mixed cues for this group, the absence of a finding for 1992 is especially surprising.¹⁵

One explanation for the lack of findings in the presidential races depicted in Table 3 might be that the visibility of the races and the public's knowledge about the candidates' positions and background causes veterans to rely on cues other than their shared veteran status when making their voting decision. For example, a candidate's

¹⁴ Since almost all of the vote choice data come from exit polls that have been designed by the same polling firm since the late 1980's, the coding of variables is virtually identical throughout the analyses. The one exception, however, is that the exit poll data used for the state level analyses employ 3 point party identification and ideology scales rather than the 5 point scales used in the Pew study.

¹⁵ We also searched for indirect effects of veteran status on political ideology and partisanship after controlling for socio-economic characteristics but omitting other political predispositions. While we find no influence of veteran status on partisanship in either 1992 or 2004, we do find mixed results for the effect of veteran status on ideology which is significant in 2004 but not in 2000. Examination of how and whether veteran socialization affects ideology is beyond the scope of this paper.

veteran status might be used as a heuristic to overcome a lack of information about the candidates. If true, then we should see an increased role for veterans' status in open seat races, for example, as levels of knowledge about incumbents are usually much higher, an effect which might serve to reduce the need for voters to rely on the veteran heuristic. We refer to the hypothesis that a candidate's veteran status will become especially important in open seat races as the *Open Seat Hypothesis*. The hypothesis holds that veterans should vote as a bloc in races where information is low and where a candidate's veteran status provides a clear cue as to which candidate to vote for. More specifically we expect veterans to vote as a bloc in races without an incumbent in which only one candidate is a veteran.

Another alternative is that veterans share an identity that remains latent unless a candidate seeks to activate it by making explicit appeals designed to heighten the shared identity. If either of these explanations is correct, then we might observe an effect of veteran status on the vote for those lower-level races in which there is some discrepancy in the candidates' veteran status. We can investigate these explanations by examining lower-level races to see whether or not we can detect any influence of veteran status in cases where veterans ran against non-veterans.

To identify data that allow us to investigate these races, we examined every state-level race for which data about respondents' veteran status are available since 1992. To account for the possible mechanisms that might activate the veterans' vote, we have categorized these races according to the typology presented in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

The typology in Table 4 categorizes candidates according to their party and whether or not they served in the military. The shaded cells highlight those races in

which a veteran candidate faced off against a non-veteran candidate. If the Veteran Candidate Hypothesis is correct, the cases in the shaded cells are those in which we should observe an independent influence of being a veteran on the vote choice. More specifically, if there is a veterans' vote, we expect it to be evident for these cases, in which one candidate is a veteran but the other is not. In toto, 17 races fall into these two cells. In contrast, if the Party Ownership Hypothesis is correct and veterans are activated because of GOP ownership of military issues, we should observe an independent influence of veterans' status in every race because a GOP candidate ran in each race.¹⁶ Finally, if the Open Seat Hypothesis is correct, we should observe an influence of veteran status in open seat races in which only one candidate is a veteran. Six open seat races pitted a veteran against a non-veteran candidate.¹⁷ All of the data from 1992 come from

¹⁶ We also re-estimated the models including an interaction designed to capture the potential impact of black veterans. The results are substantively identical to those reported herein. None of these models produces a significant effect for this interaction.

¹⁷ In 1992, the New Hampshire senate race, the California senate race between Boxer and Herschenson, and the Washington senate races were all open seat contests. In 2002, the Texas gubernatorial race, and the Minnesota and New Jersey senate races were also open seat races with veteran candidates facing non-veteran candidates. However, the Minnesota and New Jersey races were exceptional in that at least one candidate in each race was exceptionally well known. Thus if the hypothesis were to describe races without 'quality' candidates—defined as those who have not previously won statewide office or higher—then three cases would qualify.

the Voter Research and Surveys State Exit Polls, while the data for 2002 come from the Opinion Dynamics state exit polls.¹⁸

As the instruments for the state level analyses were applied about 10 years apart the questions administered varied slightly across polls. We attempted to replicate the models estimated in Table 3 to the greatest extent possible. However, differences across instruments preclude an exact match. In general, the state exit polls did not ask about church attendance, and not all questions were asked in all states. The 1992 state polls, however, allow for inclusion of measures of economic evaluations which were unfortunately unavailable in the national and 2002 state polls. Similarly, the 2002 polls allowed for examination of time in state, which might correspond to increased familiarity with state level candidates. Irrespective, the results are quite robust to differences in model specification.

[Table 5a and 5b here]

Tables 5a and 5b show the results of analyses for state level races in which veterans faced non-veterans in 2002 and 1992, respectively.¹⁹ The results are consistent with those presented in the previous tables.²⁰ In only 2 of 16 races examined do we see evidence of a veterans' vote. In the first instance, the 2002 Colorado gubernatorial race,

¹⁸ In both cases, the exit polls were designed to be administered by the same consortium (in each year) and thus the coding is largely consistent across them, although different variables are available in different years.

¹⁹ Since we have already presented the results of the 1992 presidential race in Table 5, we do not repeat them here.

²⁰ The 2002 data allow us to estimate the impact of time a person has lived in the state. The results are substantively identical when this variable is omitted.

the coefficient is significant but incorrectly signed. Veterans seemed to mobilize *against* the veteran in the race, Democrat Rollie Heath, and instead supported the popular conservative incumbent Republican Bill Owens.

The second case is more consistent with the conventional wisdom. In the 1992 Ohio Senate race, there is a significant effect of veteran status. In this race, astronaut and military hero John Glenn, who was lionized in the movie “The Right Stuff,” appears to have garnered the veterans’ vote. Glenn was arguably the most famous veteran in the country at the time of his election. Overall, we find evidence for the Veteran Candidate Hypothesis on only 1 of 17 races in which an effect is expected.

The Party Ownership Hypothesis holds that veterans should disproportionately support the Republican candidate. Evidence from additional analyses of all of the remaining (19) races that featured either two veterans opposing each another or two non-veterans facing each another (not shown here but described in Table 5) depicts no evidence of a veterans’ vote in any other race. In only 1 of 36 races (the Colorado race mentioned above) do we see an effect consistent with the Party Ownership Hypothesis.

Similarly, these results also fail to support the Open Seat Hypothesis which holds that veterans are most likely to use a candidate’s veteran status in open seat races because citizens have less information about the candidates in such contests. As in the other tests, however, the veteran variable is not significant in any of these six races.

Taken in combination, these results support neither the Veteran Candidate Hypothesis, the Party Ownership Hypothesis, nor the Open Seat Hypothesis. Given that we observe evidence of the veterans’ vote in only two races in which we would expect to see them, one must conclude that veterans are at best an erratic voting bloc. However, veterans are consistent in the sense that the factors that affect their behavior seem to be

the same as those that affect the behavior of non-veterans. Party identification and ideology and ideology are significant influences on vote choice in almost every election. So too are evaluations of the national economy and the influence of their racial background.

Discussion

These results call into question the received wisdom about the existence of a veterans' vote. While the preconditions of a veterans' vote based on shared background and political preferences are in place—veterans exhibit somewhat higher levels of socio-economic status, and are more Republican and conservative—they seldom coalesce behind a particular candidate in the dozens of elections we examine.

We developed and tested three hypotheses identifying conditions under which veterans might coalesce and vote as a group. Once political and socio-economic characteristics are accounted for however, we find very little evidence that being a veteran leads to an increased propensity to either vote Republican, or to vote for the veteran candidate. Nor do we find evidence that veterans use a candidate's military service as a decisional shortcut. These results lead to two additional questions.

First, are there conditions under which veterans might coalesce around a particular candidate? While we are unable to rule out such a possibility, the results above suggest that under typical circumstances, such effects are rare. However, we might expect that in times of crisis or war, the character traits ascribed to veterans might be seen as especially valuable. Indeed, the country has elected president a number of prominent military veterans who gained fame during wartime. Of course it is unclear whether their veteran status delivered them veterans' votes.

A second question also arises. If there is no veterans' vote, are candidates wasting their time touting their military service? As we mention above, it seems possible that benefits from veteran status may accrue indirectly. The candidate may curry favor with the public as whole, rather than veterans as a group, through such appeals. Candidates who do this may convey an image of leadership, competence, integrity and character through this "pre-political" characteristic (Fenno 1996). Future research should consider this possibility.

An alternative possibility is that there may be cohort effects among veterans. Indeed, Teigen (2006) observes precisely such effects in his study of turnout. One weakness of our study is our inability to deconstruct the veteran variable to account for differences across veteran groups, either by service, or by the time period in which one served. The experiences of a Guardsman in 1966 almost certainly reflect different underlying values, resulted in the development of different social identities, and leads to different attitudes and opinions on a host of issues, than would the experience of a Guardsman who served in 2006. Until better data become available, however, we are unable to account for the impact of these differences on political behavior.

It is also important to keep in mind the inherent weaknesses of the hypothesis testing framework vis a vis our results. Our tests, like so many others employed in the social sciences, are designed to reject a null hypothesis of no relationship between veteran status and political participation. These tests are insensitive, however, to rejecting the possibility of some relationship in favor of no relationship. Failing to reject a null hypothesis of the veterans' status influencing political behavior provides little evidence that a veterans' vote does not exist.

Our ability to accept a finding of no relationship is dependent on the size of the effect and the size of our sample—in short the power of our tests. Unfortunately, we are extremely limited in the data that are available for investigating our questions. To overcome these limitations, we search for effects in an extremely large number of campaigns. By searching for a veterans’ vote in more than 30 races, we become increasingly confident that to the extent there is a veterans’ vote, it is likely to be so small as to escape detection.

However, these results should not be taken to exclude the possibility that such effects might occur in the future. First, it could well be the case that the influence of veteran status occurs through indirect means. More specifically, veteran status might imbue veteran candidates with an aura of greater character, competence, integrity or other descriptive traits that are positively associated with vote choice (Hayes 2005). Second, it is possible that even direct effects might accrue to candidates of sufficient visibility to be recognized for their veterans’ status. To be sure, few of the candidates in our analysis were especially prominent as veterans. Only John Glenn was widely known nationally for his service, and it seems an unlikely coincidence that he is the only candidate for whom we observe a cohesive veterans’ vote. Consequently, it seems possible that the benefits of veteran status might require not just military service, but celebrity as well. It seems quite possible that Washington, Eisenhower, Jackson, and Roosevelt shared “the right stuff” with John Glenn.

Table 1. Demographics of Veterans versus the Public at Large.

	Non-veterans	Veterans
Hispanic	10.7%	3.7%
Black	9.6%	8.5%
Income	\$13,774	\$17,200
Age	44 Years old	58 years old
Female	58.5%	6%
High School diploma (or GED)	31.4%	34.6%

Source: November 2004, Current Population Survey.

Table 2. Political Characteristics of Veterans versus the Public at Large.

	Non-veterans	Veterans
Republican	43.2%	53.5%
Democrat	47.1%	39.6%
Conservative	40.3%	51.6%
Liberal	20.1%	15.3%
Voted for Bush	51%	54.1%

Source: Pew 2004 Mid-October Survey.

Table 3. Influences on the Vote for George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush.

	1992	2004
Constant	-2.25*** (0.10)	-3.88*** (0.49)
Party Identification	1.22*** (0.04)	0.79*** (0.04)
Conservatism	0.53*** (0.03)	0.57*** (0.10)
Latino	-0.14 (0.11)	0.12 (0.34)
Black	-0.78*** (0.09)	-1.23*** (0.34)
Attend	0.37*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)
Income	0.07*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.04)
Education	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.05)
Female	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01*** (0.00)
Age	0.01 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.15)
Veteran	-0.01 (0.06)	0.11 (0.20)
Observations	6445	985
log-likelihood	-2947.82	-221.51

Standard errors in parentheses; * p<10%; ** P< 5%; *** p< 1%. 1992 and 2004 data from Voter Research and Surveys General Election Exit Poll 1992, and 2004 National Election Pool General Election Exit Poll, respectively.

Table 4. A Typology of State-Level Races by Candidate Party and Veteran Status.

Is the Candidate a Veteran?		Democratic Candidate	
		Yes	No
Republican Candidate	Yes	<u>1992</u> GA Senate SC Senate <u>1994</u> VA Senate <u>2002</u> GA Gubernatorial <u>2004</u> Presidential	<u>1992</u> Presidential AZ Senate CA Senate (both races) PA Senate WA Senate WI Senate <u>2002</u> TX Gubernatorial
	No	<u>1992</u> NC Senate NH Senate OH Senate OR Senate <u>2002</u> CO Gubernatorial FL Gubernatorial GA Senate MN Senate NJ Senate	<u>1992</u> FL Senate MD Senate NY Senate <u>2002</u> TX Senate SD Senate AR Senate CO Senate MN Gubernatorial MO Senate NH Gubernatorial NH Senate SD Gubernatorial SD Senate TX Senate

Table 5a. Influence of Veteran Status on Vote Choice for 2002 State-level Races in which One Candidate is a Veteran.

	Democrat Veteran vs. GOP Non-veteran					GOP Veteran vs. Non-veteran Democrat
	Colorado Governors	Florida Governors	Georgia Senate	Minnesota Senate	New Jersey Senate	Texas Governor
Constant	-0.90* (0.51)	-0.73 (0.46)	-1.20** (0.59)	-2.77 (.607)	-2.77*** (0.61)	-1.39*** (0.52)
Party Identification	1.26*** (0.19)	1.53*** (0.15)	1.41*** (0.17)	1.79*** (.159)	1.79*** (0.16)	1.47*** (0.17)
Conservatism	0.35*** (0.07)	0.34*** (0.06)	0.37*** (0.08)	.358*** (.067)	0.36*** (0.07)	0.32*** (0.07)
Female	0.06 (0.15)	-0.19 (0.14)	-0.10 (0.16)	-.211 (.145)	-0.21 (0.15)	-0.07 (0.15)
Black	-0.73* (0.42)	-1.40*** (0.36)	-1.96*** (0.33)	-.96*** (.37)	-0.96*** (0.37)	-1.52*** (0.36)
Latino	-0.35 (0.26)	0.10 (0.25)	-1.07 (0.81)	-.427 (.41)	-0.43 (0.41)	-0.60*** (0.21)
Education	-0.19*** (0.07)	-0.10 (0.07)	0.04 (0.08)	.142** (.072)	0.14** (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)
Time in State	0.03 (0.07)	-0.12* (0.07)	-0.28*** (0.10)	-.018 (.094)	-0.02 (0.09)	0.10 (0.10)
Age	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.13 (0.10)	-.057 (.092)	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.08)
Income	0.06 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.09** (0.04)	.09** (.04)	0.09** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)
Veteran	0.40** (0.16)	-0.00 (0.15)	0.09 (0.16)	.072 (.156)	0.07 (0.16)	0.12 (0.16)
Observations	468	545	448	517	517	486
log-likelihood	-194.97	-227.51	-164.77	-197.81	-197.81	-193.68

Standard errors in parentheses. * p< 10%; ** p< 5%; *** p< 1%

All data from Opinion Dynamics state exit polls.

Table 5b. The Effect of Veterans Status on Vote for State-Level Races in 1992.

	GOP Veteran vs. Non-veteran Democrat						Democrat Veteran vs. GOP Non-veteran			
	Arizona	California (Herschenson)	California (Seymour)	Pennsylvania	Washington	Wisconsin	North Carolina	New Hampshire	Ohio	Oregon
Constant	-1.56*** (0.27)	-2.21 (.25)	-1.79 (.25)	-2.21*** (0.24)	-2.90*** (0.21)	-2.65*** (0.20)	-3.13*** (0.30)	-2.53*** (0.24)	-3.20*** (0.25)	-1.44*** (0.26)
Party	0.50*** (0.06)	.64*** (.06)	.66*** (.06)	0.40*** (0.05)	0.92*** (0.05)	0.67*** (0.05)	0.67*** (0.06)	0.72*** (0.06)	0.59*** (0.05)	0.77*** (0.06)
Conservatism		.64*** (.10k1)	.32*** (.11)	0.31*** (0.06)			0.54*** (0.07)		0.39*** (0.06)	
Education				-0.01 (0.04)			-0.12*** (0.04)		0.08** (0.04)	-0.16*** (0.05)
Income	0.06 (0.05)	-.01 (.04)	-.03 (.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Age	-0.03 (0.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	0.04** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)
Latino	0.42** (0.19)	.04 (.16)	-.04 (.16)	-0.45 (0.40)	-0.29 (0.35)	-0.91** (0.44)		0.44 (0.48)	0.59 (0.80)	-0.77* (0.39)
Black	0.30 (0.24)	-.90*** (.26)	-.61*** (.23)	-0.22* (0.13)	-0.26 (0.27)	-0.49** (0.21)	-1.05*** (0.15)	-0.46 (0.45)	-0.69*** (0.14)	0.24 (0.33)
Female	0.18 (0.11)	-.41*** (.11)	-.32*** (.11)	-0.27*** (0.09)	-0.02 (0.09)	0.05 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.10)	0.14 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.10)
National Economy	0.38*** (0.07)			0.41*** (0.06)	0.40*** (0.06)	0.50*** (0.06)	0.48*** (0.07)	0.53*** (0.07)	0.35*** (0.06)	0.37*** (0.07)
Personal Economy	-0.15** (0.07)			0.02 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.09 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.08 (0.05)	0.00 (0.06)
Veteran	0.21 (0.14)	.19 (.14)	.18 (.14)	0.10 (0.11)	0.11 (0.12)	0.06 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.13)	0.15 (0.11)	-0.19* (0.12)	-0.09 (0.13)
Observations	704	834	829	1299	1286	1413	1196	1089	1291	877
log- likelihood	-419.38	-399.91	-411.02	-735.40	-616.45	-737.16	-481.64	-588.05	-639.63	-473.37

Standard errors in parentheses. * p< 10%; ** p< 5%; *** p< 1%. Data from Voter News Service state exit polls.

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