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What shot does a candidate who's never held government office have at the nomination?

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

The two latest entrants to the Republican Presidential race, Carly Fiorina and Ben Carson, have something in common that would make them unique among recent nominees — neither of them has ever served in elective or appointive office. For either of them (or for Donald Trump, who is once again flirting with a presidential run) to win they would have to overcome the strong prejudice of only nominating previous elected officials.

Virtually every recent presidential and vice presidential candidate has been elected to serve as either a governor or in Congress prior to his nomination, and with the exception of a second choice pick in 1972, there hasn't been one whose made the ballot since the primary and caucus system took hold.

Since the start of the 20th century, there have been four presidential nominees who never held elective office. Three of them, former Secretary of War William Howard Taft, former Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover and General Dwight Eisenhower, held other major position in government.

The fourth nominee is clearly the official that Fiorina and Carson would hope to emulate — at least in terms of winning a nomination, not his general election performance — is Wendell Willkie, the Republican's 1940 standard-bearer. Willkie was a corporate utility executive and lawyer before being tapped to run. His campaign, which took place before primaries and caucuses were the main method for choosing candidates, wasn't based on grassroots support. Rather as the only internationalist in a field of Republican isolationists, Willkie won the backing of the Republican establishment.

Even before the 20th century, holding office was almost a requirement for success. The smattering of non-elected officials who managed to get a presidential nomination was mainly a collection of victorious generals. In fact, in the entire U.S. history there has never been a president who didn't previously serve as either a high ranking elected, appointed official or leading general. Only former Collector of the Port of New York Chester A. Arthur, who stepped up to the presidency after the death of James Garfield, never really held a position of importance before rising to the top (outside of his brief stint as vice president).

None of these facts have stopped leaders from other walks of the life — mainly business — from throwing their hats into the ring. In 2012, Herman Cain had a brief but memorable rise to the top of the pack of aspirants, before crashing. Other names throughout the years — like Morry Taylor, Patrick Buchanan, Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson — had their political moments in the sun, but never really got close to the nomination. The most notable non-elected official candidates were independents, like Ross Perot and Ralph Nader. But even there, their boomlets faded and they were unable to win a fifth of the vote.

The failure of outsider candidates may seem a bit perplexing when elected officials as a group have been held in such low esteem in nearly every poll and business leaders have, at times, been viewed as swashbuckling heroes. There is also no shortage of CEOs who think that they are uniquely made of presidential timber. But as voters have gained more decision-making power,

thanks to the primary and caucus system, they are even more likely to choose from the limited set of elected officials. No general has been on the ballot since Eisenhower and no former cabinet member has been chosen since Hoover.

Fiorina and Carson are both hoping to reverse this trend. But they aren't looking to any of the past examples for success — they are both hoping to run as outsiders, counting on a grassroots boom to propel them forward. Thanks to new ways to reach voters through technology, social media and the possibility of independent fundraising, both of them may see that a new path has opened to winning a nomination that hasn't been available to other non-elected candidates. But whatever these two and other business leaders are seeing would have to overcome an almost ingrained preference in presidential politics for the elected officials.

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