

Exit Stage Right: The Decision to Retire from Legislative Service

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Abstract:

Previous research has examined political ambition and other factors influencing the career decisions of legislators. This literature has outlined three general choices for members: run for reelection, seek higher office, or retire. Despite the obstacles involved in measuring and predicting legislative career decisions, past work discusses such characteristics as party system interaction, components that influence decisions to pursue elective office, and reasons why members practice progressive ambition. However, considerably less is known about the decision of elected officials to remain in office. Using the career choices of U.S. House members from 1996 to 2008, this paper examines the factors that influence retirement from Congressional service. The focus is not only on previously tested measures that influence career decisions, but also on factors that involve workplace satisfaction and chamber interaction. We find that how well members of Congress are “connected” to their colleagues and involved in legislative activity strongly influences their decision to stay on the job.

Paper delivered for presentation at the Visions in Methodology Conference,
May 4-7, 2011, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

The beginning of the 112th Congress (2011-2012) was punctuated with a relatively high number of retirement announcements by several prominent legislators, many who had previously won re-election by a comfortable margin. Seven senators in all, four Democrats, two Republicans, and one Independent decided it was time to step away from prominent and well established legislative careers at the end of their current terms, with no other job prospects in their immediate future.¹ While speculation is that some of these senators feared tougher reelection campaigns and/or have experienced increased frustrations over a growing polarized Congress, the reasons they gave for retirement focused on length of time already served and on their desire to enter a new phase of their lives. In announcing his retirement, Joe Lieberman (I-Connecticut), stated, “At the end of this term I will have served 24 years in the U.S. Senate and 40 years in elective office. For me, it is time for another season and another purpose under Heaven” (CBS New York, 2011). John Kyl (R-Arizona), a three term Senator and the Senate’s Republican Whip said, “There is no other reason than the fact that it is time...It is time for me to do something else and time to give someone else a chance” (Madison 2011). And five-term Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-New Mexico) noted along similar lines, “At some point in any one of these jobs, you come to a point where you think you’ve made your best effort and it’s time to move on and allow someone else to serve. And that’s the point I’ve arrived at” (Fonseca 2011).

Are lifestyle changes the main reason why legislators choose to retire from Congress or do other less discussed factors play a role in leaving this seemingly lucrative occupation? A substantial amount of scholarship in political science has been devoted to

¹ This count excludes the two House Members who resigned, but did not retire: Jane Harman (D-California) stepped down to take a job at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Chris Lee (R-New York), who is married, resigned after he was exposed flirting with a woman on the internet.

examining political ambition and other factors influencing the career decisions of legislators. This research is compelling because legislative work, once thought to be a form of limited civic service, has turned into a professional career. In our current political construct, legislators who voluntarily retire from office are much more the exception than the rule. Particularly at the Congressional level, the perception is that the benefits of this “prestigious” position outweigh the costs, and that a voluntary exit from such an attractive job is imprudent, compared to other career choices (Polsby 1968; Bullock 1972; Price 1975; Fiorina et al., 1975). Of course, in reality, the decision of legislators to either stay or leave is based on a multitude of factors. And while legislators who retire publicly state that they just want to “move on,” the components that may influence this decision deserve further investigation.

The literature on legislative career decisions has outlined three general choices for members: run for reelection, retire, or seek higher office (Kiewet and Zeng 1993). Despite the obstacles involved in measuring and predicting legislative career decisions, we have learned much from this literature about the interaction of the party system and the opportunity structure to influence the exercise of ambition (e.g., Schlesinger 1966), about the factors that shape whether an individual considers pursuing elective office (e.g. Fox and Lawless 2005), about why individuals take on the seemingly hopeless task of challenging incumbent members of Congress (e.g. Canon 1993), and about why individuals exercise progressive ambition (e.g., Maestas et. al. 2006).

We know considerably less about the decision of elected officials to remain in office. This may be in part because much of the theoretical foundation of the study of legislative politics regards the legislator as focused only on re-election (Mayhew 1974).

Our attention has traditionally been drawn to explaining why individuals pursue office—not why they choose to leave office. Nonetheless, the decision to voluntarily stay (i.e. run for re-election) or leave is at least as theoretically and practically important as the initial decision to seek office. The factors that influence the decision to remain in office influence both the composition of the representative body and its continuity and stability. More broadly, as More and Hibbing (1998) note, “the degree to which a legislative body can attract and especially retain members is a vital component of democratic government” (p. 1089). In other words, legislatures rely on ambition for viability. Further, most individuals face at least some measure of electoral risk in their initial pursuit of office; incumbents, on the other hand, are relatively advantaged in their re-election contests. Incumbents making decisions about pursuing re-election are also better informed about the actual experience of lawmaking and about the costs and benefits of the electoral process. For these reasons, the decision to run for re-election is a crucial part of legislative politics, and merits additional scholarly attention.

The career opportunities for Congressional members are quite constrained (basically limited to Senator, if the legislator is a member of the House, Governor, or on very few occasions, President), but these lawmakers have reached a level of service that many politicians aspire to achieve. This attainment should provide a high degree of job satisfaction and a desire to hold on to those positions as long as possible. However, personal factors (e.g., age, health, and family concerns) and professional considerations may turn *static ambition* into *discrete ambition* (i.e. desire to leave politics). In contrast to state legislators who are more often younger and at the beginning of their political careers and who often utilize their current position as a “stepping stone” for career advancement,

Congressional members have fewer “steps” to take. In sum, we expect the career choice set for members of Congress to be fairly constrained, thereby causing these legislators to consider more limited factors in their decision of whether to run for re-election or retire from service.

In this paper, we conceptualize the decision to pursue re-election as shaped by institutional, political, dispositional, and psychological factors. We draw on theories of elite political behavior, motivation, and also on psychological theories of workplace satisfaction to develop expectations regarding the factors that influence the decision to pursue re-election. We then test these expectations in the context of the U.S. Congress for the years 1996-2008.

To Run or not to Run for Re-Election

Much of the prior literature on the decision to retire focuses on the costs and benefits of remaining in office. Hall and Van Houweling (1995), for example, develop an economic theory of retirement which casts the decision to stay in office as a function of post-retirement financial benefits and prospects for retention or gain of intra-institutional leadership positions. They find that U.S. House members serving in 1992 were more likely to run for re-election if they were in a relatively advantaged institutional position; specifically, majority party members were significantly less likely to retire, particularly if they served as committee chairs. In addition to financial and institutional leadership benefits, electoral risk also shaped the decision to retire: representatives that saw themselves as electorally vulnerable (that is, those who had won the 1990 election by a relatively narrow margin, those who had been involved in the House bank scandal, or those who had been made vulnerable by redistricting) were more likely to retire.

Moore and Hibbing (1992) find that U.S. House representatives are less likely to retire if they are electorally safe and if their party is relatively unified (at least in some time periods). In a subsequent study of turnover in the U.S. House from 1983 through 2002, they find that being out of step with one's party, and the potential of a legislator to reach a position of power (calculated as the gap between one's seniority and one's age) contribute to the decision to retire. Lawless and Theriault (2005) likewise find that the chances of legislative retirement increased if legislators faced redistricting changes, if they were electorally vulnerable, and if they had served a relatively long period of time without ascending to a formal position of influence. Several scholars have found that dispositional factors matter in the decision to retire: most obviously, older representatives are more likely to retire (Hall and Van Houweling 1995; Lawless and Theriault 2005; Moore and Hibbing 1992, 1998). Lawless and Theriault also find that the effect of "career ceilings" (serving in the House for a lengthy period of time without ascending to a formal position of influence) has a relatively marked influence on the decision of female representatives to voluntarily retire.

In one of the few studies to actually survey former House members on their career decisions, Fisher and Herrick (2002) find that a legislator's job satisfaction is directly related with his or her career length; members who were more satisfied with their jobs in the House served longer terms. The authors find that job satisfaction was largely based on the meaningfulness of the legislator's work rather than on any monetary benefit that was gleaned from being a House member. Fisher and Herrick note that while their study is not the first to consider job satisfaction as an important component of legislative career choices, it is the first to directly measure its influence. In contrast, Moore and Hibbing

(1992) effectively dismiss job dissatisfaction as an explanation for voluntary House retirements. While the authors do not include a direct measure of job satisfaction, they argue that this is not a broad factor in explaining “such tremendous variation in the aggregate number of voluntary retirements from the 1970s to the 1980s and now to the early 1990s” (p. 828).

In this paper, we draw on prior literature by emphasizing the importance of costs and benefits (measured by such factors as age, electoral safety, and seniority) in contributing to the decision to retire. We also focus on legislative context—in essence, on workplace satisfaction, and the likelihood that a member will reach his or her goals. Moore and Hibbing (1992) observe that “the fact that so few retirements occurred during the 1980s, when dissatisfaction was apparently still rampant, raises questions about the belief that dissatisfaction was the real reason so many retirements occurred during the 1970s” (p. 825). They dismiss the conventional wisdom that members of Congress retire because of low satisfaction with the job, and conclude instead that “retirements generally occur on the basis of rational calculations concerning advancement potential, chances of securing re-election, and perhaps financial considerations” (p. 827). It is very likely that advancement potential and re-election prospects are crucially important determinants of the decision to continue one's career in the legislature, but it is hard to dismiss the importance of being content in the workplace and how that may influence legislative career choices. A substantial amount of evidence suggests that members are interested not only in re-election, but also in making public policy, and as Fisher and Herrick note, job satisfaction related to the pursuit of policy goals is likely a critically important factor in determining one's tenure in the legislature.

Our understanding of the relationship between legislative activity and context and the decision to retire is shaped in part by self-determination theory, a psychological theory of human motivation (Deci and Ryan 1987, 2000). Self-determination has often been applied in the study of motivation and decision-making in non-political occupational settings, but has not been widely used to inform scholarship on political careers. However, because of its emphasis on conscious choice and motivation, it offers an excellent framework in which to analyze the decision to retire—particularly in the context of legislative service, where individuals have an excellent chance of being re-elected, should they pursue that opportunity, but also often have a set of appealing options outside of the legislature. Self-determination theory identifies three innate, psychological needs shared by humans: the need for competence (succeeding at challenging tasks, and attaining desired outcomes); the need for autonomy (the perception that one is able to make important decisions, and can initiate actions—essentially, a feeling of efficacy), and the need for relatedness (mutual respect, and the ability to work with others). Self-determination theory suggests that individuals who are competent, autonomous, and related to others will be more motivated and satisfied than others (Baard, Deci, and Ryan 2004). Applied to the legislative context, this suggests that representatives who are relatively active in policy-making, who are well-connected within the legislature, who are influential, and / or who can expect to advance into positions of influence, will be more motivated to pursue re-election than their colleagues who are less active, less well connected, and have less reason to expect that they will advance into positions of greater influence. The psychological aspect is not all that different from the “no fun” argument posited by the work of Moore and Hibbing (1998)

and Theriault (1998) and similar to characteristics of job satisfaction discussed by Fisher and Herrick (2002). These scholars address levels of competence and success as determinants of how enjoyable and satisfying representatives view their jobs to be. They depart from traditional notions of dissatisfaction (“no fun”), by rejecting the idea that dissatisfaction can be an institutional occurrence that affects members across the board; rather, “...the situations under which members tend to be either more or less satisfied with congressional service” (Moore and Hibbing, 1998: 1092). We extend this line of research by arguing that how “fun” or “satisfying” House members view their position depends on numerous factors that deal with, not only individual feeling of competence, influence, and success, but is also affected by institutional context and other career choices.² This provides a basis for our arguments about factors that influence a Congress member’s decision to run for reelection or retire from legislative service. We test the following hypotheses:

H₁: Legislators who are electorally vulnerable will be less likely to run for office again

H₂ Legislators who are older are less likely to seek reelection

H₃: Legislators who serve in positions of power will be less likely to retire

H₄: Legislators who are more ideologically extreme will be less likely to run for office again

H₅: Legislators who are well connected are less likely to retire

Data and Methods

² Moore and Hibbing (1998) note that the word “fun” may not be entirely appropriate for expressing levels of job satisfaction. However, one can argue that being satisfied in one’s career increases the probability of the job being “fun.” Therefore, it makes sense that the amount of enjoyment one garners from a job (manifested in different ways) will play a role in career decisions.

Our analysis examines the likelihood that incumbents in the U.S. House will run for re-election. We gathered information on U.S. House incumbents from 1996 through 2008, including election results, legislator characteristics (partisan affiliation, seniority, leadership position, degree of connectedness within the legislature, ideology, race, gender, age), and the way in which the legislator left the legislature (that is, whether she voluntarily retired, resigned before the next election, lost a re-election bid, pursued a different office, or died in office.) There is a record in the database for every legislator who served during a particular year; in other words, there can be multiple records for a single legislator, one for each year under consideration. We eliminated from our analysis legislators who left office to pursue other elected office, or who died in office. The legislators who remain in the database fall into four possible categories: they are still serving, they voluntarily retired, they lost a primary or general election, or they resigned before their term was complete.

We employ a duration model (Cox model) to predict whether a legislator voluntarily retired in a particular year. The career decisions of legislators are important not only because of whether or not they continue serving, but also because of the factors that may increase or decrease the chances of retirement. For these reasons, an event history model is much more useful than an OLS model. The Cox proportional hazards (PH) model does not assume a particular probability for time until the actual event under examination occurs (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).³ Thus, we are able to measure the effects of our independent variables across time for each particular legislator. The

³ Unlike other duration models, the Cox proportional hazard model assumes that the hazard ratios are proportional and that the proportionality is maintained across time (Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn 2001).

dependent variable in our models is the “hazard” of retirement (duration of a legislator’s career).

Our event history models yield hazard ratios based on several groups of independent variables. First, we consider electoral risk. We measure electoral risk by including a legislator’s vote margin in the previous election. We expect that legislators who narrowly won reelection are more likely to retire from office. All else being equal, legislators who feel they are secure in their job are more likely to pursue reelection. Next, we include seniority (**SENIORITY**) as a measure of influence. Similar to previous findings, we expect that having acquired a level of prestige will help motivate a legislator to run for reelection. We also account for legislator ideology in the model (**IDEOLOGY**). Ideology is measured using Poole and Rosenthal’s first dimension NOMINATE scores obtained from James Fowler’s cosponsorship network data (Fowler 2006a, 2006b). We expect that legislator’s who are ideologically extreme experience less legislative success (are less efficacious) and may not work as well with other Congressmen, compared to those who may be more ideologically moderate. As a result, more ideologically extreme legislators are less likely to seek reelection. We also include a measure of legislative connectedness (**CONNECTEDNESS**), also obtained from Fowler’s (2006a, 2006b) cosponsorship network data.⁴ Fowler creates this measure based on the total number of cosponsors a legislator receives on each bill he or she sponsors and the total number of bills sponsored by that legislator which are then cosponsored by another legislator. As Fowler (2006b) states, “legislators who frequently cosponsor bills by the same sponsor are more likely to have a real social relationship with that sponsor

⁴ James Fowler’s cosponsorship data is available only through 108th Congresses. As a result, we calculated measures for ideology (Poole and Rosenthal scores) and connectedness (using SNA program, UCINet) for the 109th and 110th Congresses to complete our dataset.

than those that cosponsor only a few times” (p. 461). This measure of “connectedness” should tap into some of the psychological aspects of human motivation discussed earlier in the paper that lead to job satisfaction as well as a sense of belonging within the relative small “network” that is Congress. As a result, legislators who are well connected are less likely to retire. Finally, we also include several variables that capture personal characteristics of legislators. Age is measured as simply the age of the legislator; gender is coded 1 if legislator is female, 0 otherwise; and race is coded 1 if legislator is African American, 0 otherwise.

Results

Table 1 illustrates the Cox model on the retirement of House members. The higher coefficient estimates (positive values) indicate a higher hazard of legislative retirement.⁵ The first finding of note is that electoral risk is not significantly associated with a higher risk of retirement. Legislators who narrowly won reelection are not more likely to retire from legislative service. Although this result was null at the set standards of statistical significance (.05 and .10, respectively), it only missed reaching this threshold by a narrow margin (.11). We suspect that with more variance in the data this variable will have explanatory power. As expected, the table shows that the “connectedness” measure is significant in reducing the chances that legislators will voluntarily retire. It makes sense that the more involved legislators are with their work and in collaboration with other colleagues, the less likely they may want to pursue other interests. We do find that two measures in particular significantly increase the chances that a legislator will choose to retire: age and seniority. While age is expected to increase

⁵ Coefficient estimates are calculated by taking the *log* of the hazard ratio.

the chances that legislators will choose to leave office, the effect for seniority is somewhat surprising. It is expected that as members gain a level of seniority, and by extension prestige within the legislative chamber, that they would be less likely to relinquish their positions. We anticipate that a better, more refined measure of chamber (or party) influence will have the anticipated effect on a legislator's career choice. And finally, neither ideology nor our personal characteristic measures (black and female) increase the likelihood that a legislator will choose to retire.

[Table 1 about here]

Our first cut analysis on the career decisions of U.S. House members- whether a member is likely to seek reelection-reveals mixed results. As we hypothesized, being connected within the legislature has a significant effect on a member's decision not to retire from legislative service and instead seek reelection. Age on the other hand, encourages members to retire. Our results also revealed that seniority plays an important role in the career decisions of legislators, but the result is in the unexpected direction. The coefficient for seniority is positively signaled indicating an increased "hazard" of legislative retirement. It may be that once age is taken into account, once legislators exceed a particular threshold of seniority, they are more likely to leave the legislature.

Conclusion

The legislative politics literature has traditionally placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of candidates winning elections over the career decisions they make from that point forward. In other words, our attention is usually drawn on why legislators choose to initially pursue office and not on what may or may not keep them there voluntarily.

This decision is equally if not more important given that the vitality of legislatures as democratic institutions is dependent on this ambition. Within the context of their political careers, members must weigh the costs and benefits of being on the job, as well as those involved in seeking re-election. These factors include not only personal considerations, but institutional ones as well. Despite the many obstacles to identifying and quantifying these factors, research in this area continues to evolve. In this paper we take a first cut analysis at examining factors that influence the career choices of U.S. House members who served between 1996 and 2008. We emphasize the importance of workplace satisfaction and the likelihood that decisions to seek reelection are at least predicated in part on the idea of job satisfaction.

We expected that 1) legislators who are electorally vulnerable would be less likely to run for office again, 2) legislators who are more senior would be less likely to retire, 3) legislators who are older would also be less likely to continue serving, 4) legislators who are more ideologically extreme would be less likely to seek reelection, and 5) legislators who are well connected are less likely to retire. In the U.S. House, during the observed time period (1996-2008), it appears that level of inclusion within the chamber (“connectedness”) is an incentive to seek reelection, while both age and seniority provide a strong incentive to retire. Electoral margin comes close to being part of the explanatory puzzle and intuitively fits well with the narrative about what should be a strong influence on a legislator’s career choice—a tough reelection. Admittedly, this is a first cut analysis of an underexplored topic. There is clearly room for better model specification. In future iterations of this paper we plan to add variables to our model that will measure the effect of having leadership positions, measures of straight up legislative activity (e.g., number

of bills sponsored or cosponsored, floor amendments offered), and other measures of chamber interaction (e.g. centrality and transitivity). This topic is ripe for development of a social network approach to more precisely test the effects that colleagues and work environment have on a given individual. These and other factors may help provide a better understanding of how both personal and institutional politics help shape legislative career decisions.

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Cox Model For Likelihood of Retiring from the House of Representatives 1996-2008
 Model Approximated by Breslow Method

Variable	Hazard Ratio	Est. (s.e)
Electoral Risk (previous election margin)	.979	-.009 (.013)
Senior	1.04	.017* (.023)
Ideology	1.17	.068 (.394)
Connectedness	.785	-.110* (.138)
Age	1.05	.021** (.021)
Female	1.79	.253 (.792)
Black	.678	-.169 (.509)

**p< .05; *p<.10

Log likelihood = -227.18315; chi square = 29.00; prob>chi2 = 0.000

Number of subjects = 500

Time periods at risk = 1366285