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Congressional Career Decisions in the 2018 Congressional Midterm Elections

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ABSTRACT

Although we prefer to think of congressional turnover as being electorally driven and based on the choices of voters, in recent decades retirements/resignations have been a larger contributor to change in the composition of both chambers of Congress than have electoral defeats of incumbents. In this article, we consider the impact of retirements (and other forms of non-electoral exits) on the 2018 congressional midterms, focusing primarily on the House of Representatives. After reviewing the relevant (and limited) literature, we provide a descriptive overview of congressional retirements (including the unusual retirement of a comparatively young speaker of the House and almost two dozen GOP committee and subcommittee chairs) then examine the extent of voluntary retirements in this electoral cycle against historical patterns, and explore the effects of different retirements (i.e., progressive ambition versus retirement from public life). Using multivariate models, we examine which factors correlate significantly with retirement decisions, test for a partisan differential in retirement rates, and compare the rates at which the parties are capable of replacing retirees with co-partisans. Our analysis allows us to consider the ongoing importance of members' career decisions for the composition of and the partisan balance of power in the U. S. Congress. Within the context of 2018 specifically, these career decisions had substantial implications for partisan control of the House, experience and leadership within the House Republican conference, and entrance of female members into Congress and toward higher office.

Although both journalistic and academic accounts of congressional turnover focus on elections, we live in an era in which few incumbent members of Congress (MCs) are defeated for reelection. Since the end of World War II, 94.5 percent of incumbent members of the House of Representatives who have sought reelection have done so successfully. On average, during

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the 37 electoral cycles between 1946 and 2018, fewer than six MCs have been defeated in primary elections and fewer than 24 in general elections. In comparison, over this period of “superincumbency” electoral advantages, the average congressional election season has experienced almost 33 voluntary departures from the House of Representatives either to run for another office or leave public life altogether.¹

In this article, we examine congressional career decisions during the 2018 midterm election cycle.² In part we focus on this cycle because it continues the longer trend noted previously. In many ways it was a typical cycle: the incumbent reelection rate (91%) was near its modern average, it constituted the 17th election over the past four decades in which House retirements (68) exceeded incumbent electoral defeats (four in primaries, 29 in general elections), and it was the ninth cycle since 1990 in which Republicans ($n=48$) exceeded Democrats ($n=20$) in their eagerness to find the exit.³ In part, however, we interrogate the 2018 case because it includes some interesting and unusual results, including the second highest number of voluntary departures since World War II (only the 1992 cycle saw more); the smallest percentage of incumbents (86.4%) seeking reelection since 1946; the voluntary departure of the youngest speaker of the House since the 1880s; the retirements of almost two dozen presumably safe committee and subcommittee chairs; and the propulsion of an unusually high number of female candidates into the House of Representatives (and upward toward higher offices). It was also a cycle rendered interesting for being the (first?) midterm in the most disjunctive (Skowronek 1993), disruptive presidency in modern history and one that perhaps presages even greater partisan disparities in retirement patterns. (As we write this some nine months before the 2020 general election, 27 Republican MCs have announced voluntary departures before the 2020 elections contrasted with only nine Democrats.)⁴

The article unfolds as follows. After reviewing the literature on congressional retirements and the general expectations that flow from that literature, we review the 2018 election environment and provide context for our data. Then, with independent variables designed to capture both general and context-specific dynamics, we model voluntary departures from the 115th Congress. We close with a discussion of the importance of congressional retirements both generally and for the specific environment of contemporary politics.

Literature review and historical overview

In the early years of the American republic, service in federal office tended to be of short duration, even though the Founders declined to place term

limits on national posts (and in the case of federal judges stipulated lifetime appointments). George Washington famously returned to private life at Mount Vernon after two terms and would have preferred to have done so after only one (Chernow 2011). After hearing only four cases, John Jay resigned in his fifth year as the nation's first chief justice to become governor of New York. In Congress, the decades before the Civil War commonly saw a third of incumbents decline reelection, and the rate topped 50% thrice in the antebellum period (Egar and Wilhelm 2019). Lofty republican doctrine, banal considerations of where real political power rested, limited and burdensome travel options, and the isolation of the new nation's capital (Young 1966) led many politicians to consider federal service as a chore to be undertaken briefly rather than as a career in itself.

After the Civil War, voluntary departures from Congress dropped noticeably, exceeding 25% only once post Reconstruction. The growing federal agenda, improvements in transportation, and—following the 1910 revolt against Speaker Joseph Cannon—greater institutional rewards for longer tenure rendered service in Congress more attractive to many members. Since the beginning of the past century, well over three-quarters of House incumbents have sought reelection every cycle. Not since the Great Depression have more than a quarter of incumbents gone down to electoral defeat; since World War II, incumbent reelection rates have fallen below 80% only once (79.3% in 1948).⁵ Coining what would become the conventional wisdom, David Mayhew (1974, 5) described mid-20th century members of Congress as “single-minded seekers of reelection.”

It was obvious from the start, though, that not all representatives fit Mayhew's model. Every cycle, some incumbents resigned, and some opted to retire rather than seek reelection. Although the general downward trend in retirements since the 25th Congress (1837–39) was quite notable, it was not always smooth. At times—ironically, including the early 1970s, when Mayhew's classic work was published—rates of voluntary departures climbed upward significantly (Livingston and Friedman 1993; Cooper and West 1981).⁶

Legislative scholars have attempted to account for variations in voluntary departures among members of Congress. Unfortunately, both the methods employed and the results uncovered have been mixed. Using a methodological approach, some studies have been cross-sectional in nature (examining retirements in one election cycle, e.g., Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Stone et al. 2010); others have been longitudinal (e.g., Bernstein and Wolak 2002; Cooper and West 1981). Some have employed individual level data (e.g., Hibbing 1982); others have relied on aggregate figures (e.g., Wolak 2007). Disagreements have arisen regarding how to define retirement. Should it be limited to those who retire from public life, or should it also include those

who leave the House to seek other, higher office? Should it include those who resign (for whatever reason) during a Congress, or should it be limited only to those who decline to stand for reelection?

Overall, general (though not unanimous) agreement suggests that the same personal factors that labor economists use to account for retirement in the general population also exercise significant influence on MCs' career decisions. Age, tenure in office, and fiscal incentives (such as pension considerations and "golden parachutes") have usually been significant predictors of member retirement (see Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Hall and Van Houweling 1995; Stone et al. 2010). Furthermore, most studies that test for them find that members holding positions of institutional prestige (such as party leadership posts, committee and subcommittee chairs) are significantly less likely to retire (see Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Hall and Van Houweling 1995).

Other scholars have focused on the strategic considerations, especially electoral vulnerability, that might influence career decisions. As Jacobson and Kernell (1983, 50) quipped about the flock of GOP retirements after Watergate, there was "[s]omething about 1974 [that] made family men out of a disproportionate number of Republican congressmen." As intuitively appealing as this perspective is, the empirical evidence supporting it is at best mixed. Some studies (Hall and Van Houweling 1995; Hibbing 1982; Moore and Hibbing 1992) have found that previous narrow electoral margins predict retirements, but others (Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Kiewiet and Zeng 1993) have uncovered no strategic link. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of strategic calculations (Stone et al. 2010) also employs the most unusual data (elite surveys in a sample of districts in 1998). Overall, Wolak (2007, 288) concludes "we have little evidence that rates of retirement are responsive to short-term electoral forces."

Research in this area has also long noted a partisan dimension to retirement patterns. Using data from 1954–1990 and concentrating on the distastefulness of being the longstanding minority in a majoritarian institution, Gilmour and Rothstein (1993, 1996) estimated that voluntary retirements "cost Republicans anywhere from 5 to 15 seats in the House" each cycle and constituted "about 20% of the number [of seats] needed to win a majority" (1993, 358).

Ang and Overby (2008) and Murakami (2009) extended these observations into an era of Republican majorities, permitting them to speak explicitly to the issue of whether being a Republican in itself led to greater likelihood of voluntarily leaving the House. Both found a significant and enduring partisan differential, though they disagreed on its underlying dynamics (with Murakami indicting ideology, while Ang and Overby pointed to the more diffuse concept of "partisan culture").

Two other results from Ang and Overby (2008) are worth stressing. First, they found that Republican House members seemed especially disposed to progressive ambition, with a larger percentage of Republicans (3.7% on average) than Democrats (2.6%) chasing another office in each cycle between 1996 and 2006. On the plus side for Republicans, by the 1970s the GOP had reversed prior trends and had become more successful than Democrats at retaining seats that opened due to retirements. Indeed, Republicans' surging—and Democrats' waning—ability to hold open seats contributed significantly to the reversal in partisan electoral fortunes in the House between 1994 and 2006.

Our reading of the previous literature leads us to expect that (all else equal) in 2018 GOP members would be more likely to seek an early exit from the House, that this would be driven in part by a stronger partisan desire for other (“more executive”) offices, but that the net partisan effect would be muted by off-setting Republican advantages in holding open seats. As we outline later, not all expectations were borne out as the 2018 cycle unfolded.

An overview of the 2018 election cycle

As noted at the beginning of this article, several points are worth added emphasis as we review the 2018 midterm cycle. First, GOP retirees took with them a great deal of legislative leadership experience. Among the 35 Republicans who voluntarily left the House, there were 14 subcommittee chairs, eight committee chairs, and the 48-year-old Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan.⁷ Democrats, on the other hand, endured the exits of only two ranking committee members (and the former chair of their party caucus). Of the eight departing Republican committee chairs, six had exhausted the six-year limit that the House Republican Conference placed on committee and subcommittee chairs beginning with the 104th Congress (Reynolds 2017). Democrats set no limits on chair terms, although the matter has been debated in caucus.

Second, the numbers highlight what a difficult year it was for the GOP. Of the 48 House seats they vacated, Republicans failed to retain 14 (29.2%). Democrats, in contrast, saw Republicans flip only two of the 20 seats their members left voluntarily. In sum, across the 48 districts that experienced voluntary departures by Republicans in the 115th Congress, the “retirement slump” was -6.29 points, compared to a 4.3% decline in the nationwide Republican House vote relative to 2016.⁸ In relation to and casting doubt on the strategic nature of congressional career decisions, more Republican incumbents ($n = 12$) than Democrats (8) opted to forgo reelection in order to seek higher office. It was the midterm election during a presidency of

their party, but still most “generic ballot” results showed a clear Democratic skew to the election,⁹ and it was almost universally regarded as a tough year for the party, more Republicans considered it an opportunity for progressive ambition (Schlesinger 1966) than did Democrats. It is worth noting that of the dozen Republicans, only three (25%) were successful, compared to six of the eight Democrats (75%).

Third, although the empirical evidence is quite mixed as to whether voters are moved very much by charges of corruption is quite mixed (see De Vries and Solaz 2017 for a recent review), ethics concerns appear to have played a role in 2018 career decisions. In the 115th Congress, nine Republican and three Democrat MCs were formally investigated for suspected ethics violations.¹⁰ Of these 12 members, seven (58%, two Democrats and five Republicans) resigned or retired, one was defeated in the general election, and four (33%) won reelection.¹¹

Fourth, it bears notice that party unity in the House took a significant slide in 2018. Congressional Quarterly’s measure of the percentage of recorded votes on which a majority of Republicans align against a majority of Democrats fell over 17% from 76.0% in the first session of the 115th Congress to 58.6 % in 2018.¹² In part, this undoubtedly reflects the unusual nature of the disruptive politics of the Trump era. More than that, however, conditional party government theory (Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 2002) suggests that majority party members should be less fulfilled and minority party members more fulfilled when the majority has more difficulty pushing through its agenda. The relative inability of Republicans to push through more of their agenda despite controlling both chambers of Congress and the White House between 2017 and 2018 may help account for the surge in Republican retirements.

Hypotheses and analyses

To delve more deeply into congressional retirement dynamics in 2018 to see what they might tell us about ongoing and changing patterns in legislative careers, we build multivariate models using both independent variables suggested by the preceding literature and others taking account of the idiosyncratic features of the recent midterm.

Given the historical importance of both retirement and progressive ambition, we calculate two dependent variables. The first is an indicator for retirements from public life, coded 1 for representatives who retired at the end of, or resigned in the midst of, the session and 0 for those who sought other office, took an administrative appointment, sought reelection, or died in office. The second separates progressive ambition, coded 1 for members who sought other elective offices or took administrative appointments, and

0 otherwise (i.e., those who retired, ran for reelection, or died in office). Given the binary nature of our dependent variables, we rely on logistic regression estimation techniques employing robust standard errors.

We group our independent variables into four categories: personal characteristics, strategic considerations, political factors, and institutional influences. We discuss each in turn, detailing our expectations for the individual variables.

Personal characteristics

We code each member of the House for age, length of service in Congress, gender, race, and whether the member is Hispanic. Our expectations for age and length of service are straightforward: we expect both to be positively associated with retirement (indicating that advancing age and lengthy service are associated with departing public life) and negatively associated with progressive ambition (indicating that those who use the House as a springboard to other ambitions make that decision fairly early).¹³

We are less certain about our expectations for gender, race, and ethnicity. Such variables often wash out in studies of legislative behavior.¹⁴ However, given the increasingly diverse nature of American politics, we have at least mild expectations that all three variables might be significantly related to both staying in the House and seeking higher office. The increasing gender gap in favor of Democrats, a midterm in the course of an unpopular Republican presidency, changing campaign finance opportunities for female candidates, and secular increases in both ambition among potential female candidates and the number of well-situated women at lower levels of the electoral ladder (see Hayes and Lawless 2016; Kitchen and Swers 2016; Lawless 2012; Lawless and Fox 2005; Pearson and McGhee 2013) potentially positioned 2018 to be another watershed “year of the woman” in American politics.

Strategic considerations

If members of Congress are motivated by underlying hopes and fears about reelection, we should see evidence of significant weight being given to strategic concerns in career decisions. Drawing on previous research, we test for such factors. First, we measure partisan lean, calculated as the average of Mitt Romney’s 2012 and Donald Trump’s 2016 share of the two-party vote in each district. Second, for each member, we include funds raised in 2016, as derived from the Federal Election Commission database, to estimate fundraising experience and ability. Third, to capture perceived electoral security, we include each member’s share of the 2016 two-party vote

in the district. Last, we add an indicator for the dozen representatives who were formally investigated for ethics charges in the 115th Congress. If members of Congress are fundamentally strategic in their desire to remain in Congress or to be competitive in seeking higher office, we expect district lean, past fundraising success, and electoral security to be negatively associated with retirement and positively associated with progressive ambition. Conversely, corruption concerns should be positively associated with retirement and negatively associated with seeking other offices.

Political factors

Previous studies strongly suggest that both party (Ang and Overby 2008; Gilmour and Rothstein 1993, 1996) and ideology (Murakami 2009) should be associated with career decisions in 2018, so we include measures of both. We code MC party affiliation 1 for Republicans and 0 for Democrats. For ideology, we employ first dimension DW-NOMINATE scores derived from VoteView (Lewis et al. 2019), which range from -2 (strongly liberal) to $+2$ (strongly conservative). Unfortunately, because of the high level of collinearity between party and ideology in this polarized era, including them in the same models is problematic. Following Murakami (2009), we include ideology in our models broken down by party. We follow the conventional wisdom that Republicans and conservatives will be more likely than similarly situated Democrats and liberals to exit the House voluntarily either to retire or to seek higher office.¹⁵

Institutional influences

Last, we include several measures of power and prestige on Capitol Hill: for Republicans, whether a member chaired a full committee or subcommittee, and for Democrats, whether a member served as the ranking member of a full committee or subcommittee. Following previous findings, we expect members with more institutional power to be less likely either to retire or to pursue another office. However, as we have seen, GOP conference rules place term limits on both full and subcommittee chairs, apparently giving some senior Republicans incentives to depart the chamber when they lose the chair's gavel. Therefore, we also include variables coded 1 for termed-out Republican committee and subcommittee chairs, 0 otherwise. We expect these variables to be correlated with chamber departures of both sorts.

Because we are concerned with not only the statistical significance of our variables, but with their substantive impacts, we also estimate first differences for those that emerge as statistically significant in our logit equations

Table 1. Logit results of voluntary departures in the House of Representatives, 115th Congress.

	Retirement	Progressive Ambition	Retirement	Progressive Ambition
Republican	0.861** (0.343)	0.571 (0.555)	0.621 (0.552)	0.149 (0.778)
Age 2018	-0.020 (0.136)	0.466** (0.215)	-0.001 (0.116)	0.459** (0.224)
Age 2018 Squared	0.001 (0.001)	-0.005** (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.004** (0.002)
Years in Office	0.038* (0.022)	-0.003 (0.030)	0.031 (0.021)	-0.010 (0.036)
Female	0.429 (0.388)	1.210** (0.513)	0.493 (0.391)	1.364** (0.548)
Black	-1.214 (0.779)	-0.760 (1.165)	-0.979 (0.743)	-0.280 (1.216)
Hispanic	0.510 (0.550)	0.178 (0.877)	0.661 (0.617)	0.709 (0.975)
District Republican-Lean			0.008 (0.017)	0.051* (0.027)
Funds Raised in 2016			0.001*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
2016 Voteshare			-0.013 (0.015)	0.004 (0.018)
Ethics Investigation			2.370*** (0.700)	
Committee Chair			0.784 (0.583)	
Ranking Comm. Member			-0.038 (0.865)	1.175 (1.174)
Subcommittee Chair			-0.590 (0.452)	-0.671 (0.627)
Subcomm. Ranking Member			0.059 (0.519)	0.452 (0.781)
GOP Subcomm. Chair Termed-Out			1.156* (0.625)	1.055 (1.004)
Intercept	-2.118 (3.913)	-4.879** (5.858)	-2.926 (3.479)	-17.868*** (6.340)
AIC	374.90	192.05	364.98	195.23
Percent correctly classified	84.14	94.25	84.83	93.78
Observations	435	435	435	402

Note: Retirement = 1 if retired at end of session, resigned, sought other office, or took administrative appointment, 0 otherwise; Progressive ambition = 1 if sought other office or took administrative appointment, 0 otherwise;

*** ≤ 0.01 ,

** ≤ 0.05 ,

* ≤ 0.10 ; robust standard errors in parentheses.

(King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000).¹⁶ Table 1 reports the results of our logit models for retirement and progressive ambition for all members in the 115th Congress, whereas Table 2 estimates the substantive effects of statistically significant variables within 95% confidence intervals.

Although appearances suggest a strong, historical bivariate relationship between party and retirement, with Republicans retiring from the House at greater rates, such a relationship does not always survive once other factors are accounted for. This was the case in the 115th Congress. As the first column in Table 1 indicates, Republicans were more likely to retire than Democrats ($p < 0.05$) when we account only for personal attributes.

Table 2. Substantive effects for statistically significant variables in Table 2.

	<i>Change in predicted probability</i>	
	Retirement	Progressive Ambition
Baseline	0.157 [0.083, 0.265]	0.025 [0.007, 0.061]
Funds Raised in 2016	0.128 [0.024, 0.265]	
Ethics Investigation	0.485 [0.196, 0.719]	
GOP Subcommittee Chair Termed-Out	0.221 [−0.008, 0.497]	
Age 2018		0.866 [0.038, 0.991]
Female		0.067 [0.013, 0.164]
District Republican-Lean		0.095 [0.001, 0.258]

Note: 95% confidence intervals in brackets. First differences of statistically significant variables in the full models (Retirement and Progressive Ambition, columns 3 and 4, respectively) in Table 2 estimated as described in text. Because the confidence intervals in all scenarios except GOP Subcommittee Chair Termed-Out, age-squared, and District Republican-Lean do not overlap zero, all these changes are statistically significant (at 95% level or higher).

However, when other factors are included, partisanship fades into statistical insignificance.

The amount of funds raised in 2016 (oddly positive)¹⁷ and being investigated for ethics charges are significant predictors of retirement (at the 95% confidence level or higher). Changing from the mean value of funds raised in 2016 (\$1,700,624) to two standard deviations above the mean (\$4,483,876) results in a 2% to 27% greater likelihood of retirement. Representatives investigated for ethics charges were between 20% and 72% more likely to retire compared to similarly situated members who were not investigated. It is interesting to note that vote share is not significant (nor is it in any of the other party-specific models we estimate), which strongly suggests that in 2018, retirement decisions were not manifestly endogenous to feared electoral vulnerability.

Focusing on progressive ambition, the outstanding factor in Table 1 is the statistical significance of gender. Although we discuss the broader implications of gender in 2018 more fully later, it is worth noting one factor that made 2018 the “year of the woman” in congressional politics: female House members were substantially (between 1% and 16%) more likely than their male counterparts to “lean in” and seek higher office. The raw numbers tell this as well. Of the 20 MCs who displayed progressive ambition, eight of them (40%) were women. Of the 87 women who served in the 115th Congress, 9.2% (and an impressive 16% of GOP women) sought higher office, compared to only 3.4% of male MCs. Furthermore, female MCs were more likely to be successful in pursuing higher office in 2018, with a 75% win rate compared to 33% for their male counterparts.¹⁸

Table 3. Logit results of retirements in the House of Representatives by party, 115th Congress.

	Republican	Democrat
Ideology	1.589 (1.297)	-1.436 (1.337)
Age 2018	0.224 (0.188)	-0.080 (0.190)
Age 2018 Squared	-0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
Years in Office	0.085*** (0.030)	-0.026 (0.042)
Female	0.869 (0.583)	0.418 (0.584)
Black		-0.883 (0.848)
Hispanic	1.727* (1.038)	0.313 (0.898)
Ethics Investigation	2.012*** (0.669)	2.891* (1.630)
District Republican-Lean	-0.022 (0.024)	0.045 (0.030)
Funds Raised in 2016	0.001** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
2016 Voteshare	-0.006 (0.021)	-0.001 (0.019)
Committee Chair	0.396 (0.640)	
Subcommittee Chair	-0.749 (0.477)	
GOP Subcomm. Chair Termed-Out	1.122 (0.707)	
Ranking Member		0.272 (0.962)
Subcomm. Ranking Member		0.186 (0.545)
Intercept	-8.264 (5.355)	-2.712 (7.162)
AIC	229.56	144.33
Percent correctly classified	82.28	90.31
Observations	237	196

Note: Retirement = 1 if retired at end of session, resigned, sought other office, or took administrative appointment, 0 otherwise;

*** ≤ 0.01,

** ≤ 0.05,

* ≤ 0.10; robust standard errors in parentheses.

It is also worth noting that age has effects on progressive ambition that are not seen for retirements from public life. The joint significance of age and age-squared indicates that those who decide to vie for higher office are older, but not too much older, than their peers, although the significance of age-squared fades when we examine its substantive effects in [Table 2](#).

Analyzing the parties separately allows us to interrogate the effects of ideology on retirement decisions.¹⁹ We do this in [Table 3](#), which includes a member's first dimension DW-NOMINATE scores for the 115th Congress as well as other relevant independent variables; we report substantive effects for statistically significant variables in [Table 4](#).

For Democrats, the only significant predictor is an ethics investigation, although its substantive impact on retirement calculations fades in [Table 4](#).

Table 4. Substantive effects for statistically significant variables in Table 4.

	<i>Change in predicted probability</i>	
	Republican	Democrat
Baseline	0.169 [0.103, 0.255]	0.082 [0.023, 0.207]
Years in Office	0.244 [0.056, 0.466]	
Hispanic	0.362 [−0.034, 0.738]	
Funds Raised in 2016	0.202 [0.008, 0.440]	
Ethics Investigation	0.414 [0.106, 0.661]	0.483 [−0.020, 0.900]

Note: 95% confidence intervals in brackets. First differences of statistically significant variables in the model in Table 4 estimated as described in text. Since the confidence intervals in all cases except Hispanic Republicans, 2016 Funds (Republicans), and the case of ethics investigations for Democrats do not overlap zero, all others are statistically significant at the 95% level.

Republican members under an ethics cloud were between 11% and 66% more likely to retire. GOP MCs were also substantively more likely to pack it in when they were more senior (6% to 47% as they moved from mean tenure of 7.97 years to 22.47 years). However, when the substantive impact on fundraising for Republicans is calculated, the effect is no longer statistically significant. Together with the fact that it is statistically irrelevant to Democrats, the tenure in office variable is particularly interesting, suggesting that House service is a task Republicans do “for a while,” but not necessarily for their entire careers as Democrats seem more likely to do.

Contra the well-founded expectations articulated by Murakami (2009), who found substantial ideological effects both between and within parties for the 1979–2004 period, we find no evidence that ideology influenced either Democrats or Republicans in their career decisions in 2018. Although an ideological distaste for the federal government is a common theme among many members of Congress—especially Republicans—on net it did not influence their decisions to voluntarily depart Washington, DC.

Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis of voluntary departures from the House of Representatives in 2018 shows both continuity and change in congressional careers. In keeping with long-term trends (Raymond and Overby 2020), retirements and progressive ambition far outpaced electoral defeats as a source of legislative turnover. Similarly, as has been the norm over the past six decades, Republicans displayed considerably less commitment to House careers than did their Democratic colleagues. In the 2018 cycle, the partisan disparity in voluntary departures might have been exacerbated by the fact that House Republicans feared losing their “insecure majority.” As Lee (2016) has argued, the nationalization of politics regarding congressional parties

operating at relative parity influences all sorts of legislative behavior, including career decisions.

On the other hand, the voluntary departure of a young speaker of the House and the mass exodus of some two dozen committee and subcommittee chairs speak to unusual problems and self-inflicted wounds on the part of Republicans. Almost half of 2018 Republican retirees faced a future in which they would have had significantly reduced resources and wielded significantly less institutional power simply because of caucus rules. Some within the GOP, including the president, are calling for changes in those rules to stem the outflow of experienced legislators, although there is hardly a groundswell of support within the caucus.²⁰ Even if the midterm results do eventually prompt Republicans to ease their chair term limits, the levels of information, experience, focus, and legislative savvy (Hibbing 1991) the party lost to retirements in 2018 could have negative institutional echoes far into the future. Furthermore, partisan retention success in 2018 departed markedly from the historical pattern. With their more organized, “corporate” structure, Republicans are generally seen as better positioned to minimize retirement losses with successful retention efforts (Ang and Overby 2008; Masthay and Overby 2017). Their failure to do so in 2018 may signal a new era in which the party is hobbled by both retirement patterns and weakness in protecting open seats.

Our findings from 2018 also challenge some of the conventional wisdom about legislative career decisions, beliefs that have never been particularly well grounded in empirics. Despite the intuitive appeal that ideology and strategic electoral considerations should influence career decisions, nothing in our data supports the contention that more conservative members, or those who were electorally vulnerable, or those facing fundraising difficulties were more likely to seek a voluntary exit from the chamber.

It is worth closing with the observation that our preliminary analysis of the 2018 midterm election cycle underscores the enhanced status of women in the Congress and the role of voluntary career decisions in this improvement. We have already noted that female MCs were particularly likely to seek higher office in 2018 and more likely than their male counterparts to be successful when they did so. In general, of the record 102 women serving in the 116th Congress,²¹ 37 are first-term members. A majority ($n = 19$) of these women were elected to open seats vacated by retiring members or those seeking higher office. Parsing out the numbers shows that in the 2018 iteration of the “year of the woman,” female House candidates were far more successful (27.9%) when running for a vacated seat than when seeking to unseat an incumbent (4.8%). In short, higher rates of congressional retirements offer opportunities for female candidates, of which they took good advantage in 2018.

Among the many dynamics we saw at play in the 2018 midterms are: the flight of experienced Republicans due to committee term limits; the GOP's inability to exercise its historical strength in retaining open seats; and the success of female MCs running for higher office—. Only time will tell whether there are blips in the longitudinal time line or harbingers of new realities in congressional politics. Our initial analysis of the cycle, however, provides strong evidence that voluntary departures from Capitol Hill have significant implications for congressional elections, partisan control of the chamber, and legislative turnover in the contemporary era.

Notes

1. Figures from the Brookings Institution's Vital Statistics on Congress project, available online at <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/>.
2. We examine only members of the House of Representatives. Among senators, six (Senators Corker, Flake, Franken, Hatch, Kyl, and Sessions) retired or resigned whereas five (Senators Donnelly, Heitkamp, Heller, McCaskill, and Nelson) lost in general elections. See Masthay and Overby (2017) for more on modern Senate career dynamics and Brant et al. (2018) for an historical analysis of deaths in the Senate.
3. Overall, 10.3% of Democrats (20/194) and 19.9% of Republicans (48/241) chose to depart the 115th Congress or not stand for reelection to the 116th Congress.
4. See <https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/casualty-list>.
5. In a June 1992 campaign speech, Vice President Dan Quayle (a veteran of both the House and Senate) quipped that “[i]n the 100th Congress, more House members actually died—seven—than were defeated at the polls—six” (See <https://www.c-span.org/video/?26560-1/quayle-campaign-speech>).
6. For historical trends in the related incumbency advantage, see Carson, et al. (2019/2020) and Jacobson (2015).
7. In addition, the GOP lost an additional committee chair (Tom Price) and a subcommittee chair (Mick Mulvaney) when they took positions in the Trump administration.
8. It is interesting that Democrats actually saw a “retirement bump” of 2.34% in districts with vacated seats, although this was less than the nationwide uptick of 5.4% in the Democratic House vote relative to 2016.
9. For the Real Clear Politics polling average (see https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/2018_generic_congressional_vote-6185.html).
10. To access a list of the members of Congress who were investigated for suspected ethics violations in the 115th Congress (see <https://oce.house.gov/reports/115th-Congress>).
11. The four were Democrat Rep. Ray Ben Lujan (NM-3rd), who was cleared and serves as the assistant speaker in the 116th Congress; GOP Rep. Chris Collins (NY-27th), who after his arrest for insider trading was subsequently stripped of his committee assignments; GOP Rep. Duncan Hunter (CA-50th), who, following indictments for conspiracy, wire fraud, and campaign finance violations, was also stripped of his committee assignments; and GOP Rep. David Schweikert (AZ-6th), whose charges of campaign finance violations are still being investigated.
12. See <https://www.rolcall.com/news/congress/party-unity-congressional-votes>. CQ records a similar drop in unity votes in the Senate.

13. Replacing age with its quadratic (age^2) in the retirement model—to account for possible non-linear effects later in life—does not substantively affect our findings.
14. For the limited effects of these variables in congressional career decisions, see Masthay and Overby (2017). For comparative examples, see Kerby and Blidook (2011), Raymond and Overby (2020), and Yildirim and Overby (2019).
15. As Murakami (2009) explains, most House members pursuing progressive ambition run for either senator or governor. The Senate is more attractive to conservatives because of the dilatory nature of the filibuster in addition to the executive powers that senators share with the president. A governorship is more attractive in part because of the party's states' rights emphasis.
16. We opt to estimate substantive effects because results from logit analyses indicate only direction (positive or negative) and statistical significance for effects of independent variables. Following standard practice, we calculate first difference effects by switching binary variables from 0 to 1, increasing continuous variables two standard deviations above/below their means, and holding all other variables at either their mean (continuous) or mode (binary) as appropriate.
17. Drilling further into the data indicates that this odd positive correlation is not driven by the fundraising prowess of departing committee and subcommittee chairs.
18. We count Martha McSally as a "winner" in our analysis. Although she narrowly lost the Arizona Senate general election (to Kyrsten Sinema), she was subsequently appointed to the state's other Senate seat by Governor Doug Ducey, arguably a result of her earlier decision to "lean in." Even if McSally is excluded from the analysis, the substantive point remains: progressively ambitious female House members were significantly more successful in 2018 than were their male counterparts.
19. Given the relatively small number of progressive ambition cases within each party, we perform this intra-party analysis only for retirements from public life.
20. For a commentary on House Republicans discussions on term limits for committee chairs (see <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/09/24/gop-term-limits-committee-1510493>).
21. A women serving in the 116th session of Congress can be accessed at <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/list-women-currently-serving-congress>. We do not count the four women who serve as congressional delegates from American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

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