

# Calling It Quits: Analyzing Loss of Status as a Cause for Retirements in Congress

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This study examines the effect that loss of status in the House of Representatives has on the decision of a Congressperson to retire. Building on previous scholarship showing membership in the majority party of the House advances a member's personal goals and agenda, this study looks at whether members retire voluntarily when facing a diminished role in Congress. Using quantitative analysis, I compare the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, the first Republican majority in decades, to the next four Congresses, when there was no shift in the majority party. Unlike previous findings showing that the threat of the next election governs a member's behavior, including the decision to retire, I expect my findings will show that status within the House of Representatives dictates when members choose to retire.

At the end of 1994, after decades of majority rule in the House of Representatives, Democrats lost control of the House and were forced into the minority. This signaled a political shift of power lasting twelve years. Following their victory, Republicans had the chance to set their own legislative agenda for the first time in many years. However, the opposite was true for the Democrats. Faced with a diminished role, including the loss of chairmanships and other prestigious positions, how did these members of Congress react? Did they stay in Congress, or did the decrease in status increase their likelihood to retire?

This study of retirement is important because the prospect of retirement means members change the way they do their jobs. As David Mayhew argues in *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (1974), being reelected is the most important goal a legislator has in Congress. Since legislators in the House serve two-year terms, Fenno (1978) finds they are constantly looking to maintain the trust of their constituents. They do so by representing the interests and needs of their district, personally interacting with local residents at events within the district, advocating issues that their constituents care about and appropriating funding for projects that bring prestige and jobs to the district.

Figlio (2000), Rothenberg and Sanders (2000), and Tien (2001) discover that voluntary retirement from the House of Representatives has a significant impact on legislative behavior, including the tendency for members not to fully represent the interests, issues, and concerns of

their constituents, a practice known as shirking. Rothenberg and Sanders (2000) find members who plan on retiring or running for higher office have significantly higher abstention and shirking rates than those who plan to run again. This has an obvious relation to Mayhew's (1974) theory that members represent their district well because they wish to be reelected. However, when this goal is removed, members are free to change their legislative behavior. Figlio (2000) and Tien (2001) back up this conclusion, showing reelection is the most significant factor on members' level of responsiveness to their constituents. These studies indicate that by voluntarily retiring and removing the aspiration to be reelected, legislative behavior changes. Because of the impact on behavior, it is critical to find the reasons why members voluntarily retire.

## **Advantages of Majority Rule**

This study looks to answer the question of why certain House members voluntarily retire and others do not. According to Keith et al. (1992), incumbency rates in the House of Representatives stand above 90 percent in an average cycle. The members who do not retain their seats into the next Congress leave either because their constituents vote them out of office or they quit voluntarily. If incumbency rates are so high, why would a member retire?

I argue that loss of status in the House of Representatives is a significant factor leading members to retire. As Cox and McCubbins describe in *Legislative Leviathan* (1993), the "legislative cartel," usually the majority party, has the capacity to usurp power through the ability to set the rules in the House. Being a member of this majority and holding leadership positions, such as committee chairmanships, creates distinct advantages over membership in the minority party, specifically in terms of advancing party interests and agendas. Cox and McCubbins (1993) note that this advantage of status within the House also allows individual members to pursue their own goals and aspirations. Furthermore, Hasecke and Mycoff (2007)

discover rank-and-file members of the majority party tend to be loyal to the majority agenda because majority leadership can allow members to advance their individual goals.

In this study, I focus on the ability of House members to gain power and status in Congress and its subsequent impact on their other goals. Richard Fenno, in *Home Style* (1978) argues that legislators are rational and have their own goals and pursue them in a strategic manner. These goals include, (1) being reelected, (2) making good public policy, and (3) gaining power and status within Congress. As Bianco and Sened (2005) describe, achieving greater status in the House can help attain other goals, including a greater impact on agenda setting and policy influence. Greater influence in Congress also lets members represent their constituents more effectively, by advancing the policies and issues that are important to their district. Put simply, the majority party offers a more favorable career than the minority when it comes to advancing a policy agenda and representing constituents.

I expect that when members are stripped of the status that comes with being in the majority party, their chances of retiring significantly increases. When Congress shifts and the majority and minority parties switch roles, the new minority must deal with a loss of status. This ultimately means they can no longer pursue the same agenda or represent their constituents as effectively. Since the benefits of majority status are no longer available to minority party members, I predict that the dissatisfaction with their new role in Congress increases the likelihood that they will retire voluntarily.

## **Causes of Voluntary Retirement**

No factor garners as much attention and consensus in the literature as the impact of a competitive reelection upon the decision to retire. As Mayhew (1974) discusses, getting reelected is the most important goal among legislators. If legislators feel they are unlikely to win their

election then they will be more likely to retire. Hibbing (1982), Moore and Hibbing (1998), and Theriault (1998) find that continual electoral competitiveness in a legislator's district takes a toll on the incumbent and may eventually lead the member to retire. Using multivariate regression analyses, Hibbing (1982) and Moore and Hibbing (1998) show the prospect of losing an upcoming election is the most significant factor in causing members of Congress to retire. In the case of Theriault (1998), electoral competitiveness is not the most significant variable but is still significant. Brace (1985) reports similar results to Theriault (1998).

Age is also a commonly cited factor in the literature as a cause of voluntary retirements. At older ages, people are more likely to decline in health, possibly hindering the ability of older members to keep up with the rigorous pace of congressional life. At the same time, they reach an age where they may make other life choices consistent with their peers. Therefore, as members get older, it seems more likely that they would retire. Hibbing (1982), Brace (1985), and Theriault (1998) all discover a significant relationship between older age and voluntary retirement. Theriault (1998) explains the significance of age to voluntary retirements by looking at the propensity of older members to be strategically disadvantaged by their age.

Other conditions used to explain retirements from Congress include seniority and career ceilings. In the literature there is no clear consensus on whether having less seniority in the House of Representatives leads members to retire. Hibbing (1982) finds that members with more seniority are actually more likely to retire than those with less seniority. The reasoning for this is that members with less seniority aim to achieve higher status in the House and will not retire until they have done so. Theriault (1998) examines career ceilings and finds that members who reach their goals in the House are more likely to retire, affirming that those who have achieved their career goal (usually the oldest and most senior members), such as serving for a period of

time or reaching a leadership position, are the ones most likely to retire. Seniority is a double-edged sword when used as a measure of status. It provides a measure of obtained status, however, as Theriault (1998) finds, older members with more seniority tend to retire once they have obtained the career achievements that go along with status.

While these other factors may play a role in influencing members to retire, studying the shift from the majority to the minority provides a look at members' immediate reaction to a loss in status. Hibbing (1982) and Moore and Hibbing (1998) use minority/majority status to find that being a member of the minority party has a significant effect on the decision to voluntarily retire. This study expands upon their conclusions by focusing on the minority party. Since these two studies find that minority party members are more likely to retire, I look specifically at the loss in status attributed to a shift in power in the House. Minority members retire when they lose opportunities to advance their goals in Congress, and therefore their job may no longer be as satisfying. The dissatisfaction arising from a loss of status presents a scenario where members could cut their losses and retire from Congress.

I examine the effect loss of status played in the Democrats' loss of power in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, after the 1994 elections shifted the party into the minority. Richard Fenno's *Learning to Govern* (1997) and Evans and Oleszek's *Congress Under Fire* (1996) explore the reaction of Democrats who were now forced into a minority role after decades of majority rule. Long sitting committee chairs were now Ranking Members, and Democratic policies now had a smaller chance of being passed into law. In the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress eight years later, the Democrats had been in the minority for a few years and possibly were used to minority status. By comparing Democrats in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress with Democrats in Congresses leading up to the 108<sup>th</sup>, I

examine the decisions to retire between those who just lost status and others who have become accustomed to lower status.

This study examines which situations have the greatest influence on the decision of minority members to retire. I hypothesize that in comparing individual members of Congress, members of the newly constituted minority during the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress will be more likely to retire than members of the minority in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress who had the opportunity to condition themselves to their minority status. Minority party members who have served in the minority for multiple congresses may have come to terms with the disadvantages of lower status described in Cox and McCubbins' *Legislative Leviathan* (1993). Members who have spent time in the majority, however, will be much more likely to retire after they experience the loss of status involved with being in the minority.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

Since I theorize that loss of status leads to voluntary retirement, my hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>) tests whether there is a positive relationship between loss of status and voluntary retirement. Because age, seniority and electoral vulnerability were found in the literature to significantly impact a member's decision to retire, I control for these three factors in H<sub>1</sub>.

As can be seen from this hypothesis, this study examines five concepts: voluntary retirement, loss of status, age, seniority, and electoral vulnerability. Aside from my conceptualization of loss of status, the literature provides me with precise definitions for each of the concepts. Specifically, I use similar conceptualizations that Hibbing (1982), Brace (1985), and Theriault (1998) use for retirement, age, seniority, and electoral vulnerability.

Retirement is the dependent variable and is conceptualized as the degree to which individual members of Congress do not run for reelection and voluntarily retire. Voluntary

retirement includes members who decide to run for a higher office since these members are seeking a new role and, as Rothenberg and Sanders (2000) describe, present similar legislative behavior to those who plan on retiring from public service completely. This variable is nominal with two possible options: retiring at the end of their term or not retiring, coded as (0) not retiring and (1) retiring. This coding is almost universal among studies on causes of retirement.

Status is the main independent variable studied and is conceptualized as the extent to which individual members of the minority party experienced losing status within the House (i.e. moving from the majority into the minority). This variable is ordinal. The options are coded as (0) the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress; (1) the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress; (2) the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress; (3) the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress and (4) the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Age is simply conceptualized as the age of the member of Congress measured. While usually an interval-level variable, I recode age and the other control variables as ordinal in order to fit with my nominal dependent variable. The options include members who are in the age range of (1) younger than 45; (2) 45 – 54; (3) 55 – 64 and (4) 65 or older. Older ages are coded higher in order to stay consistent with H<sub>1</sub>. These ranges are used since the majority of members fall in the 45 – 64 age group, therefore creating a normal curve for ages among members of Congress.

Seniority, which Hibbing (1982) finds is correlated to age, is conceptualized as the length of time a member of Congress has served in the House of Representatives. As a control variable, seniority is an ordinal-level variable. It is coded by the number of years the member has served in Congress through the options (1) less than 4; (2) 4-7; (3) 8-11; (4) 12-15 and (5) greater than 15. I use intervals of four years to group members since this covers two full congresses, giving



members time to gain seniority in the House. Longer terms are coded higher in order to once again stay consistent with H<sub>1</sub>.

Electoral vulnerability is conceptualized as the number of percentage points by which the member won their previous election. Figlio (2000) uses this measurement of electoral vulnerability in his study. Once again, I code this control variable as an ordinal-level variable. It is coded by the percentage points by which the member won their previous election through the options (1) greater than 15; (2) 12-15; (3) 8-11; (4) 4-7 and (5) less than 4. I use intervals of four percentage points to group the competitiveness of previous elections to take into account the differences in relatively tight elections. Closer elections are coded higher to stay consistent with H<sub>1</sub>.

In order to reject this study's null hypothesis and confirm the research hypothesis I use several tests. The study uses measurements of central tendency, range and skewness. Since both the dependent and independent variables are dichotomous, I use a Chi-Squared test with cross-tabulations to test for the significance of the relationships and to confirm or reject H<sub>1</sub>.

In order to test this hypothesis, I use data mostly compiled on my own that uses individual members of the minority party as the unit of analysis. Data on retirement, electoral vulnerability, age, seniority and status mainly comes from Congressional Quarterly, as well as the National Journal and the Library of Congress' Information Services. This data about members of Congress is public information and is widely available. I also supplement this data with two datasets. I use Carroll McKibben's (1997) dataset describing members' reasons for leaving the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress in order to find retirement data for that Congress. I also use Stewart and Woon's (2009) dataset, which describes House membership data from the 103<sup>rd</sup> to the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, to supplement information on age, seniority and electoral vulnerability.

## Results

After compiling data from 1,059 Democratic members of Congress from the 104<sup>th</sup> to the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, I test whether status played a major role in legislators' decisions to retire. I also compared the relationship between retirement and age, seniority and electoral vulnerability, three variables that have been used to predict retirement in previous scholarly research.

To test for the statistical significance between retirement and status, I use a Chi-Square Test (Figure 1). After running the test, the chi-square value shows that that this relationship does not closely fit with the null hypothesis (opposite of  $H_1$ ). Therefore, I can reject the null hypothesis and confirm my hypothesis. With my hypothesis confirmed, I turn to proportional reduction in error (PRE) measures to determine the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable (Figure 1). Here Phi and Cramer's V report a moderate relationship. While this is not a strong relationship, it is significant. It does not dismiss age, seniority and electoral vulnerability as other possible predictors of retirement, nor does it claim that status is a better predictor than other factors. However, the .168 value still shows a relationship.

While the main goal of these tests was to accept or reject the hypothesis, I have also taken into account three control variables: age, seniority, and electoral vulnerability. Looking at the Chi-Square Test, it is evident that the relationship between retirement and status is much more significant among older members, particularly those who are 55 or older (Figure 2). With the PRE measures, 55 – 64 years old and members who are 65 years or older values are interpreted as moderate to moderately strong relationships, respectively. Among these ages, status has about a one in four chance of predicting the decision to retire.

I also control for seniority. After conducting a Chi-Square Test, there is evidence that the relationship between retirement and status is much more significant among those who have served in Congress for greater than 15 years (Figure 3). The Phi and Cramer's V PRE measures translate to moderately strong to strong relationships. This result is the strongest of all of the PRE measure results and shows that among members who have served in Congress for greater than 15 years, status has almost a one in three chance of predicting retirement.

Finally, I control for electoral vulnerability, a variable that has been discussed and used frequently in prior scholarship (Figure 4). Surprisingly, I find that the closest previous elections, those who won by less than 4 percentage points has the weakest relationship of all of the control variables. The chi-square value here shows the null hypothesis is still unlikely, but drastically more likely than with the other relationships. The PRE measures, however, show an extremely strong relationship. This is puzzling after a poor chi-square result (relative to the other variables). It is possible that there is some other factor that is affecting this PRE result.

**Figure 1**

**Tests (Retirement v. Status)**

	Pearson Chi-Square			Measure of association <sup>a</sup>
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
<b>Retirement v. Status</b>	29.889	4	.000***	.168

a. Phi and Cramer's V used as measures of association

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

**Figure 2**

**Test (Retirement v. Status: Controlling for Age)**

	Pearson Chi-Square			Measure of association <sup>a</sup>
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
<b>55 – 64 years old</b>	22.423	4	.000***	.239
<b>65 years old or older</b>	13.348	4	.010**	.283

a. Phi and Cramer's V used as measures of association

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

**Figure 3**

**Tests (Retirement v. Status: Controlling for Seniority)**

	Pearson Chi-Square			Measure of association <sup>a</sup>
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
<b>Greater than 15 years</b>	18.623	4	.001**	.294

a. Phi and Cramer's V used as measures of association

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

**Figure 4**

**Tests (Retirement v. Status:  
Controlling for Electoral Vulnerability)**

	Pearson Chi-Square			Measure of association <sup>a</sup>
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
<b>Less than 4 % points</b>	9.054	4	.060*	.444

a. Phi and Cramer's V used as measures of association

\*  $p \leq 0.10$

An initial look at the cross-tabs shows there is a relationship between the status of a member of Congress and their decision to retire. Of the 87 members of Congress that retired during the period tested, 34 or 39.1 percent were from the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress. Only 22 (25.3 percent) retirees were from the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress and a scant 7 (8 percent) were in the 106<sup>th</sup>. The 107<sup>th</sup> and 108<sup>th</sup> Congresses saw a slight increase in retirements, with 13 and 11 respectively. However, there is a clear trend in the data analysis (Figure 5). After the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress there were a slew of retirements that tapered off as the Democrats settled into their lowered status within the House of Representatives. Even through the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress, Democrat members still may have been uneasy about their role in Congress, inducing many to retire.

**Figure 5**

### **Retirements by Congress (104<sup>th</sup> – 108<sup>th</sup>)**

		<b>Congress</b>				
		<b>104<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>105<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>106<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>107<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>108<sup>th</sup></b>
<b>Not Retiring</b>	Count	175	191	207	201	198
	Percentage	83.7%	89.7%	96.7%	93.9%	94.7%
<b>Retiring</b>	Count	34	22	7	13	11
	Percentage	16.3%	10.3%	3.3%	6.1%	5.3%
<b>Total</b>	Count	209	213	214	214	209
	Percentage	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

## **Discussion**

The focus of this study has been to find whether status within the House of Representatives is a significant factor in determining a member of Congress' decision to retire.

Based on previous scholarship, status was not a well-researched or widely accepted factor in determining retirement. Therefore, my results add to the existing literature and take the discussion on congressional retirement and behavior in a different direction. The results show that status is a significant factor and that older members with lower status are more likely to retire.

The significance of this relationship not only alters Hibbing (1982) and Moore and Hibbing's (1998) conclusions on why members retire (tough reelection and age), but also changes how we look at congressional behavior in general. David Mayhew's theory that reelections dictate behavior (*Congress: The Electoral Connection*, 1974) and Richard Fenno's four point theory (*Home Style*, 1978) do not fully take into consideration status as a factor that drives members of Congress. If members are more likely to retire or change careers because of a loss in status, it is also important to analyze whether status is a factor in how members act on a day-to-day basis. If we follow the contrapositive of this relationship, we find that having higher status within the House of Representatives leads members of Congress to stay. Therefore, this means that as members of Congress make rational decisions on a daily basis, they are taking into account the benefits of their position within Congress. Those who are part of the "legislative cartel" as Cox and McCubbins (1993) describe in *Legislative Leviathan* find that status allows them to achieve other goals (i.e. getting reelected, achieving policy agendas, or seeking higher office). Without status, member of Congress have a smaller chance of achieving their goals, and their job becomes tougher and less satisfactory. In turn, they retire.

The results, however, weave an even more interesting narrative than simply stating that status plays a role in congressional behavior. Older members in the twilight of their careers, and members who have been in Congress for at least 15 years are more likely to retire when their

status is suddenly lowered. These members include those Democrats who were able to take advantage of the benefits of majority status before becoming the minority before the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress. These results further solidify the theory that members better achieve their goals when they have higher status within the House of Representatives, and that when this status gets taken away (especially after holding it for a long time) it dissuades them from staying.

## **Conclusion**

While the results of this analysis are significant, there are other questions that can be answered in the future. There are other factors that I did not take into account that can be examined in further research on this topic. First, this study does not account for the political environment in Congress during the mid-1990's. Specifically, while Democrats were in the minority for most of the 1990's, they also had had a Democrat in the White House (Bill Clinton), which was a major advantage to their political agenda. There may be other unknown relevant issues that influence the way members of Congress behave, in particular those that pertain to retirement. Also, the political environment in individual congressional districts might have been a factor. After the 1990 Census, congressional districts were redrawn, leading many members of Congress to represent slightly different districts.

Second, while I did find a significant relationship between my independent and dependent variables among Democrats, I might be overlooking the possibility that Democrats and Republicans act differently. The political philosophies of Democrats and Republicans tend to differ in terms of how they view the role of government, so it raises the question of how these abstract philosophies translate into how they behave or when they choose to retire. Also, another question to consider is how interconnected the two parties are. Do Republicans vote together as a bloc more than Democrats? If so, then it would seem that the highly connected Republicans

would be more likely to dissuade their other Republican colleagues from retiring. A study comparing how the parties are interwoven and communicate among each other, especially at a time of political and institutional change, may shed light on this question.

While this is a small-scale study, it can be expanded for further research. First, the study can start by increasing the total amount of data by including congresses before the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress and after the 108<sup>th</sup>. Also, adding Republicans to the study would allow for a comparison between the two parties. Similarly, another case study could be added, thus allowing for a comparison and a larger sample size. The best and most recent case study would be after the party switch in 2006 when Democrats regained control of Congress. It would start with the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress and work forward. Since we are still in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, this study would need to wait for a couple years until more data is available.

In summary, the results of the study confirm my hypothesis that members of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress were more likely to retire than members in the following four congresses. Therefore I can conclude that status is an important factor in determining how members of Congress behave, specifically relating to their decision to retire from Congress. While the study is limited in its scope, its results are significant and show that members of Congress are rational and make decisions based on whether they can advance their goals or interests. Since status allows them to achieve these goals, it is a significant factor in legislative behavior.



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