

The Electoral Incentive

What animates members of Congress? The discussion to come will hinge on the assumption that United States congressmen¹ are interested in getting reelected — indeed, in their role here as abstractions, interested in nothing else. Any such assumption necessarily does some violence to the facts, so it is important at the outset to root this one as firmly as possible in reality. A number of questions about that reality immediately arise.

First, is it true that the United States Congress is a place where members wish to stay once they get there? Clearly there are representative assemblies that do not hold their members for very long. Members of the Colombian parliament tend to serve single terms and then move on.² Voluntary turnover is quite high in some American state legislatures — for example, in Alabama. In his study of the unreformed Connecticut legislature, Barber labeled some of his subjects “reluctants” — people not very much interested in politics who were briefly pushed into it by others.³ An ethic of “volunteerism” pervades the politics of California city councils.⁴ And in the Congress itself voluntary turnover was high throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Yet in the modern Congress the “congressional career” is unmistakably upon us.⁵ Turnover figures show that over the past century increasing proportions of members in any given Congress have been holdovers from previous Congresses — members who have both sought reelection and won it.