

CRS Report for Congress

Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, First - 110th Congresses

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Summary

The average tenure of Members of the Senate and House of Representatives at the beginning of each Congress has varied substantially since 1789. The purpose of this report is to provide a Congress-by-Congress summary of the average years of service for Senators and Representatives for the First through the 110th Congresses. The information for each Congress reflects only the Members entitled to be seated at the beginning of that Congress.

The report contains a brief summary of some of the explanations by political scientists and others for the various changes in the average years of service. The information should be read with the understanding that the length of congressional careers has also depended on the number of congressional retirements as well as the success rates for those incumbents who have sought reelection. For information on the number of freshmen elected to Congress, refer to CRS Report RS20723, *Freshmen in the House of Representatives and Senate by Political Party: 1913-2007*, by Mildred Amer.

The average years of service for Members of the 110th Congress, as of January 3, 2007, when the Congress convened was 10.0 years for the House and 12.82 years for the Senate. This is a record for the Senate. House Members who took their seats at the beginning of the 102nd Congress (1991-1993) represent the high point of Representatives' average tenure (10.4 years).

This report will be updated after the commencement of the 111th Congress.

Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Analysis of Data | 2 |
| House of Representatives | 2 |
| Senate | 3 |

List of Figures

| | |
|---|---|
| Figure 1. Average Years of Service for Senators and Representatives, by Chamber and Congress, 1 st - 110 th Congresses | 4 |
|---|---|

List of Tables

| | |
|---|---|
| Table 1. Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, First - 110 th Congresses | 5 |
|---|---|

Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, First - 110th Congresses

Introduction

During the early history of Congress, turnover in membership was frequent, and resignations were commonplace. Although the Constitution provides that U.S. Senators serve for a term of six years, it was not until the 50th Congress (1887-1889) that the average tenure of Senators reached six years. While the average service of Members of the House began to exceed their two-year term by the Fourth Congress (1795-1797), it did not rise above four years until the 57th Congress (1901-1903). According to political scientist Randall Ripley, “In the pre-modern Congress, Members came and went rapidly. There were few senior members. Life in Washington was not pleasant; Congress did not seem very important, and the unstable party situation often made re-election difficult to achieve.”¹

Political scientist H. Douglas Price wrote that “the distinguished Senators of the 1st Congress set the early career pattern for that chamber: They fled the Capitol ... almost as fast as humanly possible.... Career data on the early Senate is a morass of resignations, short-term appointees, elective replacements.... There are no notable careers in terms of service.”² According to Price, the lack of incentives for Members to retain their seats explains the high turnover in those early years of the House. Power was fluid in the House. The Speaker controlled committee appointments; there was frequent change in party control, and no seniority influence.³ Price also wrote that the Congress elected in 1900 was the first in American history in which new Members accounted for less than 30% of the membership.⁴

After the 1880s, circumstances changed and the rise of careerism in Congress began in the period from 1890-1910.⁵ The strengthening of the party system, the

¹ Randall B. Ripley, *Congress: Process and Policy*, 4th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988), p. 50.

² H. Douglas Price, “Congress and the Evolution of Legislative ‘Professionalism,’” in Norman Ornstein, ed., *Congress in Change* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1995), p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ David Brady, Kara Buckley, and Douglas Rivers (Stanford University), “The Roots of Careerism in the House of Representatives,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 1994, p. 2. vol. 24, November 1999, p.

(continued...)

emergence of one-party states and districts following the Civil War, and institutional changes in Congress made re-election easier. The emergence of national problems raised a legislative career to a new level of importance; and the demonstration by Congress, after Lincoln's death, that it intended to play a more assertive role in government contributed to many Members' desire to remain in Congress.⁶ Subsequently, legislative careers became common, and the concept of the "citizen legislator" became a thing of the past.⁷

Some political scientists and others have attributed the demise of the "citizen legislator" and the stabilization of congressional membership to (1) the importance of the seniority system; (2) increased opportunities for junior Members; (3) the ease of traveling between Washington, DC, and home states and districts; (4) senior Members' involvement and success in promoting legislative agendas; and (5) the advantages of incumbency that allow Members to generate publicity, serve constituents, and receive support in organizing their offices and forming agendas that help them be effective legislators.⁸

In recent years, the fluctuations in congressional service averages cannot be attributed to any single factor. Self-imposed term limits, retirements, election defeats, and redistricting have all been factors.⁹

Analysis of Data

Table 1 shows, by chamber and by Congress, the average years of service at the beginning of each Congress. The freshmen Members of each house are counted as having no service (zero years). Changes in membership during a Congress are not taken into account.

House of Representatives. Between the Second and 12th Congresses (1791-1813), the average years of service for a Member of the House ranged from a low of 1.1 years to a high of 3.7 years. From the 13th Congress to the 47th Congress (1813-1883), the average service fluctuated from a low of 1.4 years in the 33rd Congress (1853-1855) to a high of 3.4 years in the 20th Congress (1827-1829). From

⁵ (...continued)
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⁶ Ripley, *Congress: Process and Policy*, p. 51; and Price, "Congress and the Evolution of Legislative 'Professionalism,'" p. 9.

⁷ Howard Baker, "'Citizen Legislators' Would Be Better," *Washington Post*, July 8, 1983, p. 21; and Saul Pett, "Baker Seeks to Change Face of Congress," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 21, 1983, pp. 2, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, and John R. Hibbing, "The Modern Congressional Career," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, June 1991, p. 425.

⁹ For additional studies on congressional service, see Nelson Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 41, March 1968; and Robert G. Brookshire and Dean F. Duncan, "Congressional Career Patterns and Party Systems," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. VIII, February 1983, pp. 65-78.

the 48th through the 69th Congresses (1883-1927), the average was between 2.5 years and 5.8 years. In the 70th through the 72nd Congresses (1927-1933) during the Great Depression, the average years of service rose to an all-time high, to that point, of around seven years of service.

One of the highest levels of turnover in the 20th century occurred in the Franklin D. Roosevelt landslide election of 1932, and in succeeding congressional election cycles as Republicans began to regain seats lost in 1932. In the 73rd through the 75th Congresses (1933-1939), the average length of House service fell to about five years before trending upward (with some fluctuations) over the next 65 years.

From the 84th through the 101st Congresses (1955-1991), service ranged from then record highs of eight to more than nine years, with the exception of the 96th through the 98th Congresses (1979-1985), when service was somewhat more than seven years. In the 102nd Congress (1991-1993), the average House service reached an all-time high of 10.4 years. The average length of service then fluctuated between eight and nine years from the 103rd to the 109th Congresses (1993-2005), except for the 104th Congress (1995-1997), when the change in party control saw the average service decline to 7.5 years. In the 110th Congress, because of numerous long-serving Members, the average years of service is back at 10 years for the first time in 16 years.

Senate. Between the Second and 21st Congresses (1791-1831), the average years of Senate service ranged from a low of 1.4 years (Second Congress) to a high of 4.9 years (21st Congress). From the 22nd Congress through the 48th Congress (1831-1885), the years of Senate service averaged over three and under five. With the exception of the 62nd and 63rd Congresses (1911-1915), when the average length of Senate service was about five years, the years of service from the 49th through the 75th Congresses (1885-1939) averaged from around six to just under eight, an indication that many Senators were beginning to serve more than one term. Note that the direct election of Senators began with the elections to the 63rd Congress (1913-1915).

From the 76th through the 79th Congresses (1939-1947), Senate service was at a then all-time high of eight years and has never fallen to five years again. With the change in party control at the beginning of the 80th Congress (1947-1949), however, it did fall to 6.6 years, before trending upward from the 81st through the 94th Congresses (1949-1977). Average Senate service passed the 10-year mark in the 89th Congress (1965-1967), where it remained through the 94th Congress (1975-1977).

From the 95th through the 100th Congresses (1977-1989), Senate service fluctuated between a high of 9.8 years in the 95th Congress (1977-1979) and a low of 7.5 years in the 97th Congress (1981-1983), then remained between 10 and 11.8 years from the 101st through the 108th Congresses (1989-2005). Average Senate service reached record highs in the 109th and 110th Congresses (2005-2009) with 12.3 years and 12.8 years of service, respectively. As with the House, there are a number of long-serving Senators, including one whose Senate service will reach 50 years on January 3, 2009, and another whose service will reach 46 years in November 2008.

Figure 1. Average Years of Service for Senators and Representatives, by Chamber and Congress, 1st - 110th Congresses

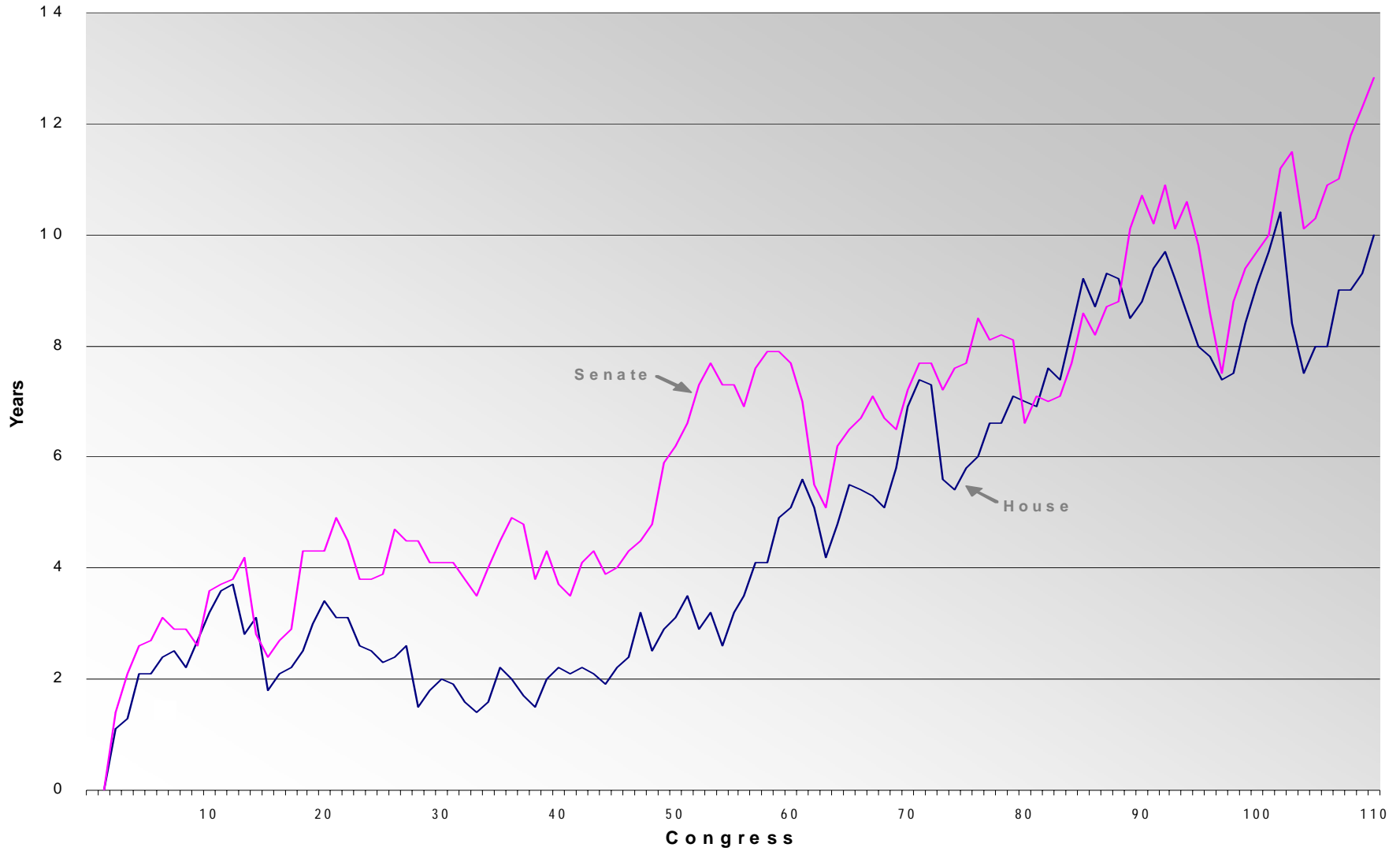


Table 1. Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, First - 110th Congresses

| Congress and Years | House | Senate |
|------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1 st , 1789-1791 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 2 nd , 1791-1793 | 1.1 | 1.4 |
| 3 rd , 1793-1795 | 1.3 | 2.1 |
| 4 th , 1795-1797 | 2.1 | 2.6 |
| 5 th , 1797-1799 | 2.1 | 2.7 |
| 6 th , 1799-1801 | 2.4 | 3.1 |
| 7 th , 1801-1803 | 2.5 | 2.9 |
| 8 th , 1803-1805 | 2.2 | 2.9 |
| 9 th , 1805-1807 | 2.7 | 2.6 |
| 10 th , 1807-1809 | 3.2 | 3.6 |
| 11 th , 1809-1811 | 3.6 | 3.7 |
| 12 th , 1811-1813 | 3.7 | 3.8 |
| 13 th , 1813-1815 | 2.8 | 4.2 |
| 14 th , 1815-1817 | 3.1 | 2.8 |
| 15 th , 1817-1819 | 1.8 | 2.4 |
| 16 th , 1819-1821 | 2.1 | 2.7 |
| 17 th , 1821-1823 | 2.2 | 2.9 |
| 18 th , 1823-1825 | 2.5 | 4.3 |
| 19 th , 1825-1827 | 3.0 | 4.3 |
| 20 th , 1827-1829 | 3.4 | 4.3 |
| 21 st , 1829-1831 | 3.1 | 4.9 |
| 22 nd , 1831-1833 | 3.1 | 4.5 |
| 23 rd , 1833-1835 | 2.6 | 3.8 |
| 24 th , 1835-1837 | 2.5 | 3.8 |
| 25 th , 1837-1839 | 2.3 | 3.9 |
| 26 th , 1839-1841 | 2.4 | 4.7 |
| 27 th , 1841-1843 | 2.6 | 4.5 |
| 28 th , 1843-1845 | 1.5 | 4.5 |

CRS-6

| Congress and Years | House | Senate |
|------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 29 th , 1845-1847 | 1.8 | 4.1 |
| 30 th , 1847-1849 | 2.0 | 4.1 |
| 31 st , 1849-1851 | 1.9 | 4.1 |
| 32 nd , 1851-1853 | 1.6 | 3.8 |
| 33 rd , 1853-1855 | 1.4 | 3.5 |
| 34 th , 1855-1857 | 1.6 | 4.0 |
| 35 th , 1857-1859 | 2.2 | 4.5 |
| 36 th , 1859-1861 | 2.0 | 4.9 |
| 37 th , 1861-1863 | 1.7 | 4.8 |
| 38 th , 1863-1865 | 1.5 | 3.8 |
| 39 th , 1865-1867 | 2.0 | 4.3 |
| 40 th , 1867-1869 | 2.2 | 3.7 |
| 41 st , 1869-1871 | 2.1 | 3.5 |
| 42 nd , 1871-1873 | 2.2 | 4.1 |
| 43 rd , 1873-1875 | 2.1 | 4.3 |
| 44 th , 1875-1877 | 1.9 | 3.9 |
| 45 th , 1877-1879 | 2.2 | 4.0 |
| 46 th , 1879-1881 | 2.4 | 4.3 |
| 47 th , 1881-1883 | 3.2 | 4.5 |
| 48 th , 1883-1885 | 2.5 | 4.8 |
| 49 th , 1885-1887 | 2.9 | 5.9 |
| 50 th , 1887-1889 | 3.1 | 6.2 |
| 51 st , 1889-1891 | 3.5 | 6.6 |
| 52 nd , 1891-1893 | 2.9 | 7.3 |
| 53 rd , 1893-1895 | 3.2 | 7.7 |
| 54 th , 1895-1897 | 2.6 | 7.3 |
| 55 th , 1897-1899 | 3.2 | 7.3 |
| 56 th , 1899-1901 | 3.5 | 6.9 |
| 57 th , 1901-1903 | 4.1 | 7.6 |
| 58 th , 1903-1905 | 4.1 | 7.9 |

CRS-7

| Congress and Years | House | Senate |
|------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 59 th , 1905-1907 | 4.9 | 7.9 |
| 60 th , 1907-1909 | 5.1 | 7.7 |
| 61 st , 1909-1911 | 5.6 | 7.0 |
| 62 nd , 1911-1913 | 5.1 | 5.5 |
| 63 rd , 1913-1915 | 4.2 | 5.1 |
| 64 th , 1915-1917 | 4.8 | 6.2 |
| 65 th , 1917-1919 | 5.5 | 6.5 |
| 66 th , 1919-1921 | 5.4 | 6.7 |
| 67 th , 1921-1923 | 5.3 | 7.1 |
| 68 th , 1923-1925 | 5.1 | 6.7 |
| 69 th , 1925-1927 | 5.8 | 6.5 |
| 70 th , 1927-1929 | 6.9 | 7.2 |
| 71 st , 1929-1931 | 7.4 | 7.7 |
| 72 nd , 1931-1933 | 7.3 | 7.7 |
| 73 rd , 1933-1935 | 5.6 | 7.2 |
| 74 th , 1935-1937 | 5.4 | 7.6 |
| 75 th , 1937-1939 | 5.8 | 7.7 |
| 76 th , 1939-1941 | 6.0 | 8.5 |
| 77 th , 1941-1943 | 6.6 | 8.1 |
| 78 th , 1943-1945 | 6.6 | 8.2 |
| 79 th , 1945-1947 | 7.1 | 8.1 |
| 80 th , 1947-1949 | 7.0 | 6.6 |
| 81 st , 1949-1951 | 6.9 | 7.1 |
| 82 nd , 1951-1953 | 7.6 | 7.0 |
| 83 rd , 1953-1955 | 7.4 | 7.1 |
| 84 th , 1955-1957 | 8.3 | 7.7 |
| 85 th , 1957-1959 | 9.2 | 8.6 |
| 86 th , 1959-1961 | 8.7 | 8.2 |
| 87 th , 1961-1963 | 9.3 | 8.7 |
| 88 th , 1963-1965 | 9.2 | 8.8 |

| Congress and Years | House | Senate |
|-------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 89 th , 1965-1967 | 8.5 | 10.1 |
| 90 th , 1967-1969 | 8.8 | 10.7 |
| 91 st , 1969-1971 | 9.4 | 10.2 |
| 92 nd , 1971-1973 | 9.7 | 10.9 |
| 93 rd , 1973-1975 | 9.2 | 10.1 |
| 94 th , 1975-1977 | 8.6 | 10.6 |
| 95 th , 1977-1979 | 8.0 | 9.8 |
| 96 th , 1979-1981 | 7.8 | 8.6 |
| 97 th , 1981-1983 | 7.4 | 7.5 |
| 98 th , 1983-1985 | 7.5 | 8.8 |
| 99 th , 1985-1987 | 8.4 | 9.4 |
| 100 th , 1987-1989 | 9.1 | 9.7 |
| 101 st , 1989-1991 | 9.7 | 10.0 |
| 102 nd , 1991-1993 | 10.4 | 11.2 |
| 103 rd , 1993-1995 | 8.4 | 11.5 |
| 104 th , 1995-1997 | 7.5 | 10.1 |
| 105 th , 1997-1999 | 8.0 | 10.3 |
| 106 th , 1999-2001 | 8.0 | 10.9 |
| 107 th , 2001-2003 | 9.0 | 11.0 |
| 108 th , 2003-2005 | 9.0 | 11.8 |
| 109 th , 2005-2007 | 9.3 | 12.3 |
| 110 th , 2007-2009 | 10.0 | 12.82 |

Sources: From the First through the 101st Congresses (1789-1991), the source was the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. For the 102nd through the 110th Congresses (1991-2007), the years of service were calculated by CRS.