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## R&R: Retirements from and Retentions in the Popularly-Elected Senate

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**R&R:**  
**Retirements from and Retentions in the Popularly-Elected Senate**

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**Abstract**

While there has been a good bit of scholarly attention paid to career dynamics in—including retirements from—the U. S. House of Representatives, relatively less attention has been paid to the Senate. The few studies of career decisions in the upper chamber (*e.g.*, Bernstein and Wolak 2002; Masthay and Overby 2017) have focused on the more or less modern Senate. In this study, we extend the time series back to the early 1900s, taking in the entire century of the popularly elected Senate. In doing so, we increase our analytical leverage to explore dynamics in the frequency, ratio (compared to electoral defeats), and direction (*i.e.*, progressive ambition or retirement from public life) of voluntary departures from the upper chamber. We are particularly interested in the ability of the parties to retain Senate seats opened up by voluntary departures and focus our multivariate analysis on that question. Among our most noteworthy findings are 1) that the partisan differential in retirements so obvious in the House (with Republicans outpacing Democrats in voluntary departures) is absent not only in the modern Senate but over the entire history of the elected chamber, and 2) that the GOP is systemically better at retaining open seats in the upper chamber, a finding consistent with other work on party asymmetries.

In an era characterized by high rates of incumbent re-election, a disproportionate share of legislative turnover comes not from involuntary departures due to electoral defeat but from voluntary departures resulting from retirement. Since 1970, *Vital Statistics on the Congress* shows that the 952 retirements from the House of Representatives significantly surpass the 615 electoral defeats (a ratio of 1.55 to 1).<sup>1</sup> Though not as stark, the numbers in the Senate still heavily favor retirements (166) over electoral defeats (120), with a ratio of 1.38 to 1. While House retirements have received reasonable (if somewhat episodic) scholarly attention, there has been little research done on the scope, causes, and consequences of Senate retirements, and what little work has been done on the upper chamber has focused on the “modern” Senate (Livingston and Friedman 1993; Bernstein and Wolak 2002; Masthay and Overby 2017). In this paper, we expand upon this prior work by extending the analytical frame back to the 66th Congress (1919-1920), the beginning of the popularly elected Senate. In particular, we focus in this paper on the parties’ ability to hold onto Senate seats vacated by voluntary departures.

There are several compelling reasons to do so. First, the longer view gives us greater purchase on Senate retirements by lengthening the time series, allowing us to explore whether such things as the turnover ratios are phenomena of the modern Senate or whether they are of longer standing. Second, it will similarly give us greater leverage to explore what partisan dynamics—if any—are at work in Senate retirement decisions. Research on the modern Senate (Masthay and Overby 2017) has found no evidence of the partisan retirement differential so persistent in the House, where Republicans tend to retire at a significantly higher rate than Democrats. The data we analyze here will allow us a clearer view of whether and how the attractiveness of Senate seats has varied across parties over a century of time. Third, we will be able to explore the phenomenon of progressive ambition in greater detail. In the contemporary

Senate, relatively few senators—roughly one percent (Masthay and Overby 2017)—opt to leave the upper chamber in pursuit of other offices. Is that figure stable across time? Or, has the value of Senate seats varied over the past century? And what of the offices that have been deemed to be promotions above the upper chamber? Our extended data set promises to give us some purchase on these questions.

All of these matters are interesting because, as Ernest Hemingway once said, “retirement is the ugliest word in the language” ... and legislative retirements come with significant costs, especially to the party that has held the seat. Retirements rob the incumbent party of the “personal vote” advantage it has enjoyed in a constituency, opening up the contest to greater “action” (Gaddie and Bullock 2000). While the value of incumbency, *per se*, has varied over time (see, *e.g.*, Gelman and King 1990; Jacobson 2015; Jacobson and Carson 2016), it has been measured as high as 8.5 percent in the House, making an opposition party pick up at least marginally more likely. In addition, retirements set the stage for potentially contentious and expensive internecine contests to replace the incumbent (see Ang and Overby 2011 on the increase in primary candidates and costs following House retirements). Furthermore, as Hibbing (1991) has demonstrated, more senior legislators are more experienced, focused, and effective, meaning that retirements cost a party legislative expertise and clout.

As a result, a primary focus of our analysis is on the parties’ ability to retain seats that become open due to voluntary departures from the Senate. Research in the House of Representatives (Ang and Overby 2008) has found a GOP advantage in open seat retention dating to the 1980s; but investigations of seat retentions in the Senate, while suggestive of a Republican advantage, have been only cursory (see Masthay and Overby 2017). Our data will

allow us to interrogate this finding both across a substantially longer period and controlling for other factors.

Our exploration of these issues unfolds as follows. In the next section, we review the relevant literature on legislative retirements, including open seat retention, focusing on the limited previous research on the Senate. Then, after describing our historical dataset, we describe some of the broader trends visible in the data. We then turn our attention to the core focus of this paper: the ability of the parties to maintain control of Senate seats vacated voluntarily due to either retirement or progressive ambition. We conclude with some reflections on variations seen in Senate career decisions and party retention efforts over the course of the century of the elected Senate.

### **Previous Research**

Much of the previous research on congressional retirements has been part of the larger literature on the lengthening of legislative careers in the 20th century ... and the periodic upticks in congressional turnover. Just as Mayhew (1974, 5) was penning his celebrated assumption that members of Congress could be considered “single-minded seekers of reelection,” there was an unexpected swell in voluntary House retirements in the 1970s, though incumbent reelection rates remained high. Scholars (see Cooper and West 1981) who tried to make sense of these conflicting trends singled out the unintentional consequences of institutionalization (*e.g.*, lengthening sessions, more complex policy issues, increasingly demanding constituents), and the burdens of fund-raising in the post-Watergate world) as likely causes. “[T]he job [was] ... not fun anymore,” they concluded. Others (such as Hibbing 1982) complemented this analysis by noting that operational changes, such as departures from the seniority norm for choosing committee chairs, further undermined the desire of senior members to remain on the Hill.

Shifting the focus to the individual factors that drive career decisions, scholars such as Kiewiet and Zeng (1993) and Moore and Hibbing (1992) explored the impacts of such personal circumstances as age, seniority, electoral vulnerability, and ideological distance from the party median, though the results are far from consistent (*e.g.*, as expected, Moore and Hibbing found age to be a significant predictor of retirement, whereas Kiewiet and Zeng did not). Groseclose and Krehbiel (1994) and Hall and van Houweling (1995) analyzed the effects of financial circumstances on retirement decisions, with the former finding that the termination of House rules that permitted “grandfathered members to pocket their campaign warchests” contributed to a surge in retirements in 1992 and the latter discovering a broader underlying economic rationale to retirement decisions.

Another focus of congressional retirement research has been on its partisan implications. Analyzing data from 1954 to 1990, Gilmour and Rothstein (1993, 1996) noted the unpleasantness of minority status in a majoritarian institution like the House of Representatives and found a significantly higher rate of retirements among House Republicans than Democrats, calculating retirements “cost the Republicans anywhere from 5 to 15 seats in the House .... about 20% of the number [of seats they] needed to win a majority” (1993, p. 358). Ang and Overby (2008) extended this line of research, taking advantage of the natural experiment afforded by the GOP’s electoral success in 1994 elections to examine whether historically higher rates of retirement among Republicans were, in fact, due to their long-term minority status. Their finding that Republicans continued to outpace Democrats in voluntary departures even after they had won a majority suggests that fundamental partisan differences not minority/majority status lie at the heart of differential retirement rates, “and contributed to their ouster as the majority party in the elections of 2006” (2008, 339). Examining data from the 97th through 108th Congresses

(1997-2004), Murakami (2009) came to similar conclusions, again finding higher retirement rates among Republican House members, but attributed this to ideology rather than partisanship *per se* (e.g., looking within the parties, he found that among both Democrats and Republicans more conservative MCs were more likely to leave the chamber voluntarily than their more liberal co-partisans).

As in many areas of congressional studies (Oppenheimer 2002), research on Senate careers has lagged that in the House. To the best of our knowledge, only three published studies (Livingston and Friedman 1993; Bernstein and Wolak 2002; Masthay and Overby 2017) have analyzed Senate retirement patterns. Motivated by the surge in congressional retirements during the 1970s, Livingston and Friedman (1993) inspected data from both chambers in the 1980s, determining that the previous decade's spike had been an "aberration." Their largely descriptive analysis uncovered a slight (1 percent) greater tendency toward retirement on the part of both House and Senate Republicans compared to their Democratic colleagues, but their attenuated time series precluded them from determining whether this was due to being Republicans or being in the minority (1993, 247). Bernstein and Wolak (2002) deployed a more extensive longitudinal data set to examine Senate retirements between 1962 and 2000, finding only two variables significantly related to retirements: age and membership in the minority party. Unfortunately, not only did they treat all retirements identically (*i.e.*, there is no differentiation between retirement from public life and progressive ambition), they also tested only for majority/minority party status, not partisanship itself. More recently, Masthay and Overby (2017) analyzed retirements in the "modern Senate," dated from the campaign finance and filibuster reforms of the early 1970s. Between the 93<sup>rd</sup> and 113<sup>th</sup> Congresses, they found no evidence in either their bivariate or multivariate analyses of any significant partisan differential in either full retirement from public

life or among progressively ambitious senators, nor did they find any significant ideological effects. Rather, full retirements from the Senate were influenced positively by age, being up for re-election, length of service in the chamber, being an appointed (rather than elected) senator, and (counter-intuitively) being in the minority, and negatively by prior legislative service; the only significant correlates to progressive ambition were tenure in the chamber (positively) and previous legislative experience (negatively).

Research into the dynamics of open seat elections has also focused on the House of Representatives. In one of the most extensive treatments of the topic to date, Gaddie and Bullock (2000) examined the rise in open seat contests for the House from the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s, focusing on the period from 1982-1994. While they did not test explicitly for partisan effects and are interested in factors effecting the vote in open seat races rather than a party's ability to hold onto seats after a retirement, Gaddie and Bullock's results do suggest a certain Republican "frustration" during the period of their analysis, especially since an apparent paucity of electorally experienced candidates at the House-level limited the party's ability to match its presidential-level successes (2000, 171).

While Gaddie and Bullock (2000) are most interested in how open seats "jump-start congressional careers," others have been attentive to the connection between incumbents' end-of-career retirement decisions and the ability of their parties to hold onto these seats. In their work on Republican retirements from the House, Gilmour and Rothstein (1993) noted that the GOP was hampered not only by higher retirement rates during most of the 1954-1990 period but also by lower open-seat retention rates compared to Democrats. However, looking at a longer time series, going up to the 2006 election cycle, Ang and Overby (2008) found that by the 1980s



Republican open-seat hold rates had surged past the Democrats, allowing them to attenuate some of the electoral cost of their higher retirement rates.

Again, relatively little research has been done into open seat Senate races.<sup>2</sup> In their investigation of Senate retirement dynamics, Masthay and Overby (2017) provided a summary analysis of holds and losses by party of the resulting open seats. For the 93<sup>rd</sup> through the 113<sup>th</sup> Congresses, they found a roughly 11 percentage point Republican advantage, with the GOP holding 55 of the 79 seats made open by its retirees (69.6 percent) compared to the Democratic hold rate of 52 of 88 (58.4 percent), but they did not subject this finding to multivariate analysis. Given previous research on the asymmetries between the parties (Axelrod 1972; Freeman 1986; Grossman and Hopkins 2015, 2016), we suspect that the Republican dominance in holding open Senate seats might be of longer standing than previous research has shown and might result from systematic and on-going advantages enjoyed by the GOP.

### **Data and Descriptive Analysis**

To extend and expand our understanding of Senate retirements over time, we analyze data from the 66th through the 116th Congresses (1919-2020). We start with the 66th because this was the first Congress in which all members of the Senate were popularly elected, following the phase in of the 17th Amendment. Over this period, 884 distinct senators served in the chamber (461 Democrats and 423 Republicans). For each senator in each Congress, we code whether s/he retired fully from public life, left the Senate to pursue (successfully or not) or accept another public office,<sup>3</sup> was defeated in a re-election bid, died in office, or returned to the Senate in the following Congress.

Table 1 presents a summary of departures from the Senate over this extensive time series, disaggregated by party and by type of departure (*i.e.*, retirement from elected office, progressive

**Table 1.** Departures from Senate, 66<sup>th</sup>-116<sup>th</sup> Congresses

Congress	Retirements		Progressive Ambition		Electoral Defeats	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
66 <sup>th</sup>	4	0	0	2	8	1
67 <sup>th</sup>	2	3	1	1	10	1
68 <sup>th</sup>	2	1	0	0	4	9
69 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	0	0	5	1
70 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	0	1	0	13
71 <sup>st</sup>	2	6	0	2	7	0
72 <sup>nd</sup>	2	1	2	0	5	7
73 <sup>rd</sup>	2	0	1	1	3	11
74 <sup>th</sup>	2	1	1	0	2	8
75 <sup>th</sup>	4	1	2	0	1	5
76 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	3	0	10	0
77 <sup>th</sup>	1	0	1	0	6	2
78 <sup>th</sup>	2	2	3	0	10	0
79 <sup>th</sup>	4	4	1	1	5	4
80 <sup>th</sup>	2	4	2	0	11	2
81 <sup>st</sup>	3	2	1	0	0	8
82 <sup>nd</sup>	2	2	0	1	7	2
83 <sup>rd</sup>	0	3	1	1	6	5
84 <sup>th</sup>	4	1	1	0	2	4
85 <sup>th</sup>	0	5	0	1	1	3
86 <sup>th</sup>	4	2	2	0	0	10
87 <sup>th</sup>	2	2	0	0	1	0
88 <sup>th</sup>	1	0	1	1	2	4
89 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	0	0	2	3
90 <sup>th</sup>	3	3	0	0	4	0
91 <sup>st</sup>	3	1	0	0	7	1
92 <sup>nd</sup>	2	3	0	0	4	3
93 <sup>rd</sup>	3	4	0	1	2	2
94 <sup>th</sup>	4	4	1	0	5	4
95 <sup>th</sup>	5	5	0	0	5	2
96 <sup>th</sup>	2	2	1	1	12	1
97 <sup>th</sup>	2	2	0	0	1	1
98 <sup>th</sup>	2	2	0	0	1	2
99 <sup>th</sup>	2	3	1	0	0	7
100 <sup>th</sup>	3	2	0	2	1	3
101 <sup>st</sup>	0	2	0	2	0	1
102 <sup>nd</sup>	4	3	2	0	3	2
103 <sup>rd</sup>	6	3	0	0	3	0
104 <sup>th</sup>	8	5	0	2	0	2
105 <sup>th</sup>	3	1	0	1	1	2
106 <sup>th</sup>	4	1	0	0	1	4
107 <sup>th</sup>	1	4	0	1	2	2
108 <sup>th</sup>	4	3	1	0	1	0
109 <sup>th</sup>	3	1	1	0	0	6
110 <sup>th</sup>	0	6	4	0	0	4
111 <sup>th</sup>	7	6	0	1	3	1
112 <sup>th</sup>	7	5	1	0	0	2
113 <sup>th</sup>	6	4	0	0	5	0
114 <sup>th</sup>	3	1	0	1	0	2
115 <sup>th</sup>	1	5	0	1	4	2
116 <sup>th</sup>	1	1	1	0	1	2
Party Totals	138 (of 2710) (5.1%)	133 (of 2275) (5.8%)	36 (1.3%)	25 (1.1%)	174 (6.4%)	161 (7.1%)
Senate Totals	271 (5.4%)		61 (1.2%)		335 (6.7%)	

ambition, and electoral defeat, deaths in office excluded<sup>4</sup>). Several facets of this summary warrant comment.

First, when taking in the full sweep of the elected Senate, you do not see the predominance of voluntary versus involuntary departures seen in more recent decades. In fact, over the course of the 51 Congresses between the 66<sup>th</sup> and the 116<sup>th</sup>, electoral defeats (335) edge out the combined total of retirements and progressive ambition (332). That is because prior to the 93rd Congress, there were almost twice as many defeats per election cycle (8.8) than there were after (4.5), while rates of retirement per Congress have increased less steeply (from 5.7 to 7.95).<sup>5</sup>

Second, the longer time series permits us to confirm that the relative frequency of retirements compared to progressive ambition among senators is not a modern phenomenon. Across the entire time series, roughly 82 percent of all voluntary departures are due to retirement from public life. We summarize a bit more information about progressive ambition in Table 2. Since the 66th Congress, of the 61 senators who opted to leave the chamber to seek or accept other offices or appointments, governorships have been the most tempting offices, with 17 senators running in gubernatorial contests,<sup>6</sup> 11 successfully. Thirteen senators have left the upper chamber to accept cabinet positions, with Secretary of State (3) being the most common appointment.<sup>7</sup> A dozen senators have left the Senate to pursue the vice presidency, 11 successfully (most recently Kamala Harris); only half as many (six) left to seek the presidency, of whom three have been successful. Seven senators have departed upon receiving appointments to the federal courts (two of those to the Supreme Court). Other voluntary departures include three leaving to accept ambassadorial posts, two for lower-level state offices,<sup>8</sup> and one (Warren Austin [R-VT]) departed the 79th Congress to accept a post as special advisor to the ambassador to the United Nations enroute to assuming that office himself. In terms of patterns evident in the

progressive ambition data, the 1940s were the most active decade, with a dozen cases of progressively ambitious senators, which is perhaps not surprising given the political tumult of the war years. In contrast, the 1960s (n=2), 1970s (n=4), and 1980s (n=5) were relatively quiet decades in this regard.

These data also give us some sense of what posts have been offered to and been considered valuable by sitting senators, and how those factors have changed over time. Most noteworthy perhaps are the facts that 1) although through the 1940s seats on a federal court were tied with governorships as the most common destination for progressively ambitious senators, the last sitting senator to leave for a seat on the federal bench was in 1949; and 2) the last sitting senator to be named to a major diplomatic post was in 1954.<sup>9</sup> Since the 1950s, virtually every senator leaving for another political position has been seeking either the presidency, vice presidency, or a governorship, or accepting a cabinet position.

**Table 2.** Progressive Ambition from the Senate, 1919-2020

<b>Subsequent Office Sought</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Governorship	17 (11 successful)
Cabinet Post	13
Vice Presidency	12 (11 successful)
Federal Judgeship	7
Presidency	6 (3 successful)
Ambassador	3
Other State Offices	2
Other	1
Total	61

Returning to Table 1, the third point obvious in the descriptive data is that while there are partisan differences in voluntary departure rates, they are quite marginal. Summing full retirements with senators departing to take or pursue other positions shows a 6.4 percent overall

voluntary departure rate for Democrats compared to a 6.9 percent rate for Republicans. While this is a bit larger than the negligible (0.1 percent) partisan differential reported in Masthay and Overby (2017) for the latter part of the time series, it is both statistically and substantially insignificant.<sup>10</sup>

### **Seat Retentions and Multivariate Analysis**

Shifting our focus to seat retentions, Table 3 lays out results by party for each Congress between the 66<sup>th</sup> and the 116<sup>th</sup>.<sup>11</sup> Overall, the parties do well in terms of holding Senate seats, filling them with co-partisans of the departing senator almost two-thirds of the time (in 217 of 332 cases). But, just as Masthay and Overby (2017) found in the era of the modern Senate, we also find a partisan difference in the data going back to 1919. Over the longer time series, Democrats held their vacated seats approximately 62 percent of the time (in 106 of 172 opportunities), while Republicans experienced success over 70 percent of the time (in 111 of 158 instances). A difference of means test on these figures shows that the difference is statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). These numbers are broken down by decade in Figure 1. Over the course of the ten decades in our analysis, Republicans held a decided advantage in four (the 1920s, 1940s, 1990, and 2010s) and the Democrats in only two (1930s and 1970s, the New Deal and Watergate eras); the other four decades were relatively close in terms of partisan holds.

To ensure that the bivariate findings outlined above survive in the face of typical controls and to explore what other factors might be associated with partisan seat retention, we develop a multivariate model, guided by earlier research in both chambers.

On the left-hand side, our dependent variable is dichotomous, coded 1 for instances in which the party holds the vacated seat, 0 when it does not. To mitigate possible concerns about

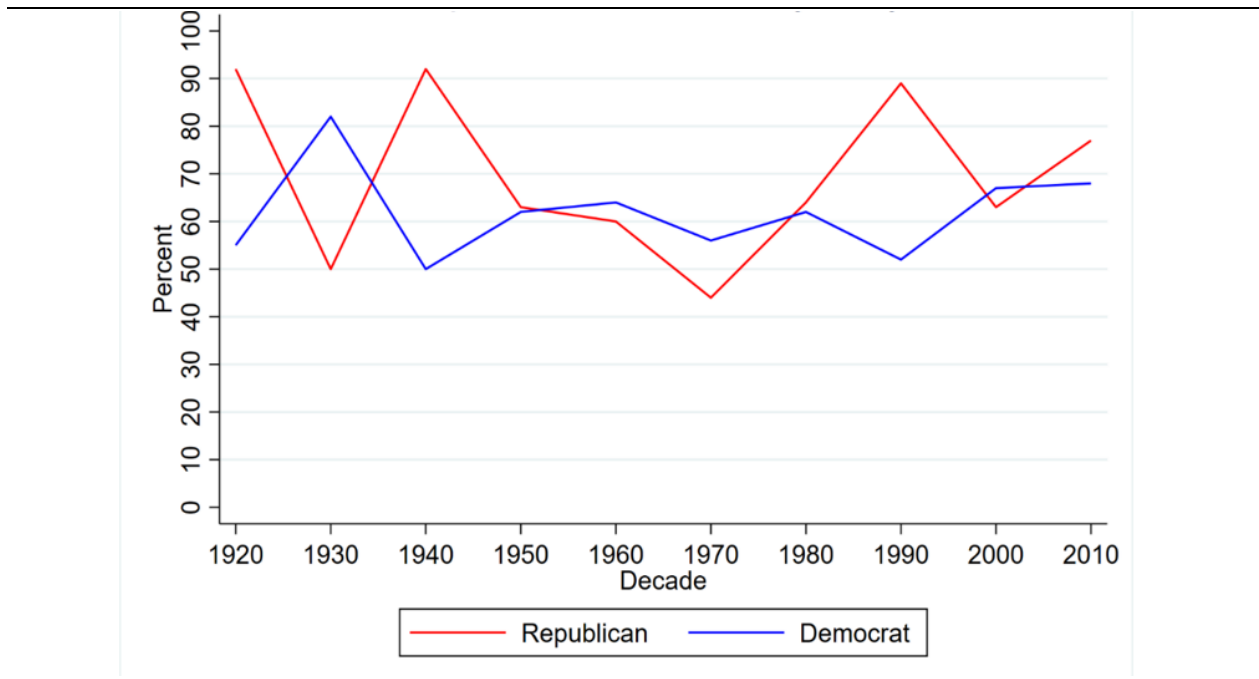
heteroscedasticity, we use robust standard errors clustered by senator and also include fixed effects for congresses (which are not reported).

**Table 3.** Open Seat Senate Holds and Losses (1919-2020)

Congress	Holds		Losses	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
66	2	3	2	0
67	3	4	0	0
68	0	1	2	0
69	1	2	0	0
70	0	2	1	1
71	2	4	0	4
72	4	0	0	1
73	3	0	0	1
74	2	1	0	0
75	3	1	3	0
76	2	2	2	0
77	2	0	0	0
78	1	2	4	0
79	1	4	4	0
80	4	3	0	1
81	4	1	1	1
82	1	3	1	0
83	0	3	1	1
84	3	0	2	1
85	0	3	0	3
86	4	1	2	1
87	2	0	0	2
88	2	1	0	0
89	0	2	1	0
90	1	2	2	1
91	2	1	1	0
92	1	1	1	2
93	2	2	1	3
94	3	1	2	3
95	2	3	3	2
96	3	3	0	0
97	0	1	2	1
98	2	1	0	1
99	2	1	1	2
100	1	3	2	1
101	0	4	0	0
102	6	3	0	0
103	0	3	6	0
104	5	6	3	1
105	1	1	2	1
106	3	0	1	1
107	1	5	0	0
108	0	1	5	2
109	4	1	0	0
110	4	3	0	3

111	3	7	4	0
112	7	4	1	1
113	3	3	3	1
114	3	2	0	0
115	1	3	0	3
116	-	3	-	1
	106 (of 172) (61.6%)	(111 of 158) (70.3%)	66 (of 172) (38.4%)	47 (of 158) (29.7%)

**Figure 1.** Open Seat Hold Rate by Party



On the right-hand side, we include a number of conventional control variables and emphasize that we are less interested in overall model fit than in testing the robustness of the partisan difference seen in the bivariate results. Our primary variable of interest is, of course, the party of the retiring senator, which we code 0 for Democrats and 1 for Republicans; we code “independent” senators according to the party with which they caucused. As measures of the strength of the retiring senators’ party within a state, we include their share of the two-party vote in the preceding Senate election, the length of their tenure in the Senate, whether there is a sitting governor of the same party, and whether the other senator is a member of the same party. *Ceteris*

*paribus*, we expect all of these measures to be positively associated with a party's ability to hold a seat.

To account for the one party domination of the South during most of our time series, we also include a variable indicating whether or not the retiring senator was a Democrat representing one of the 11 states that had formed the Confederacy. While this effect is likely attenuated or reversed in recent decades, for the entirety of our timeline we expect the effect to be significant and positive. To account for possible inter-branch or balancing effects, we control for whether the retiring senator and incumbent president were of the same party as well as whether this was the case in a presidential midterm election cycle. To control for the ideology of the retiring senator, we include a measure calculated as the absolute distance between the retiree's first dimension DW-NOMINATE score and that of the median senator in that party in the current Congress. All else equal, we anticipate that greater ideological distance will reflect a weaker party "brand" in the state and make it more difficult for the party to retain the seat. Although the Senate is usually considered a less majoritarian institution than the House, previous research (Masthay and Overby 2017) found an unexpectedly high rate of retirements among minority members, so we control for whether or not the retiring senator was a member of the majority party in the most recent Congress.<sup>12</sup> Given that an appointed senator who did not seek an elected term might indicate an interim, "caretaker" position for a party not well positioned to win a general election, we include a variable indicating whether the retiring senator was holding an appointed position. Finally, we include the log of the state's population size in the most recent census to account for the fact that more populous states might be expected to have more competitive statewide elections.



We do not include a number of usual demographic characteristics as control variables in our model—including age, race, and gender—since there is no theoretical justification for these factors impacting partisan hold rates. However, in an additional model not reported, none of the variables ever reached anything approaching statistical significance and our results reported below remain substantively identical. A number of other variables are presumably related to party success in holding seats made open due to retirements, including the quality/experience of the candidates and their funding (Gaddie and Bullock 2000). Given the reach of our time series far back before the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 and the difficulties of finding comprehensive and comparable data on candidate quality (especially early in the time series), we opt for a more parsimonious model here with hopes to expand and extend the analysis in the future.

Other significant variables of interest include the state having a governor and second senator of the same party as the retiring senator. The positive signs on these variables (and the lack of significance of the presidential variable) indicate the significance of underlying state partisanship and (in comparison with other variables in the model) an indication that Senate elections are more about state-level than national-level forces. The negative sign on the presidential variable indicates that to the extent they matter, national factors cut against the party of the president being able to retain open Senate seats, a result consistent with a certain amount of balancing behavior among voters (see Erikson 2016 on balancing in Senate elections).

Since we are interested not merely in statistical significance but also in substantive importance, we estimated the substantive impact of party on ability to hold Senate seats. Setting other variables in our model at either their mean (continuous) or modal (binary) value as appropriate, we estimated first differences in partisan hold rates.<sup>13</sup> Results indicate that

Republicans are between 1 and 12.64 percent more likely to hold their open seats than are Democrats. That is not only itself statistically significant at the 0.05 threshold, it also indicates that the advantage for Republicans seen in the descriptive statistics reported in Table 1 is maintained even in the presence of a variety of powerful control variables.

**Table 4.** Logit Results Influencing Partisan Holds of Open Senate Seats (1919-2020)

Party of Departing Senator (GOP=1)	0.009** (0.004)
Incumbent's Share of Two-Party Vote in Preceding Election	0.003 (0.015)
Departing Senator's Tenure in Office	0.001 (0.001)
Incumbent Governor of Same Party	0.649* (0.345)
Fellow Senator of Same Party	0.981*** (0.329)
Democratic Share of State Two-Party Vote in Preceding Presidential Election	0.021 (0.019)
Incumbent President of Same Party	-0.742 (0.576)
Midterm Election Cycle with President of the Same Party	-0.241 (0.739)
Southern Democrat	0.755 (0.576)
Ideological Distance of Departee from Party Median in Senate	-0.877 (0.828)
Member of Majority Party in Senate	-0.309 (0.380)
Departing Senator Appointed	0.155 (0.492)
State Population (logged)	0.053 (0.409)

## Discussion

In an era marked by significant incumbency advantages, voluntary rather than involuntary departures are key to legislative turnover and composition. In this article, we have added to a small, but growing, literature on retirements from the U. S. Senate, lifting our analytical gaze over the entire history of the popularly elected Senate. In doing so, we have

examined ways in which Senate retirements vary from those in the House of Representatives, as well as ways in which the modern Senate differs from the early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Senate.

We have also, however, been cognizant of the fact that retirements are only part of the story. Guided by Gaddie and Bullock's (2000) observation that open seats are "where the action is," we have focused our examination on the parties' abilities to hold open seats following retirements. Our findings, borne out through both descriptive and multivariate analyses, indicate that Senate Republicans are a) not handicapped by higher rates of retirements as they are in the House; and b) are, in fact, significantly advantaged in retaining seats that are vacated through voluntary departures. While it is difficult given our data to isolate exactly the cause of this Republican advantage, it certainly fits within the portrait of partisan asymmetry described by others (Axelrod 1972; Freeman 1986; Grossman and Hopkins 2015, 2016; for congressional races in particular see, *e.g.*, Beck 1997, 94-95; Bibby 1992, 93-95; Crotty and Jacobson 1980, 176-77; Herrnson 2004, 180-84; Huckshorn 1980, 89-91; Jacobson and Carson 2016, 88-97; Sorauf 1984, 122). Given their historically more homogenous composition and more hierarchical structure (in which, as the common saying goes, they tend to "fall in line"), Republicans seem better equipped and better organized than Democrats to "manage" careers and concentrate on defending legislative seats that come open due to retirements. One additional—if negative—bit of evidence in support of this comes from analyzing open seats due to death in office. In our time series we have 135 such cases. When we analyze these instances using the same multivariate model, party does not emerge as a significant predictor of hold rates. In other words, when departures are unexpected and sudden, the parties are equally (mal)adept at holding the seats. But when they have time to prepare for the eventuality, Republicans appear to be significantly better at the task.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the dynamics of partisan holds of open Senate seats due to retirement provides important insights into the composition and control of Congress. In this paper, we have taken an early step by extending the analysis of partisan hold of open seats to the entire history of the popularly elected Senate. To underscore the importance of these findings, it is worth referring again to Table 3. Over the broad sweep of the time series, from the 66<sup>th</sup> to the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, Republicans enjoyed a 10-point advantage in holding open Senate seats. Over time, however, that advantage has grown. Using the periodization developed by Theriault (2013) (see also Theriault and Rohde 2011) and focusing on the most recent, “partisan” era, which Theriault dates from the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress (1981-1983), we can see that Republicans have retained 55 of 74 Senate openings (74.3 percent) contrasted to the Democrats’ 60.5 percent (46 of 76). If this trend continues, Democratic hopes of regaining and retaining a Senate majority become significantly more distant.

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<sup>1</sup> To further accent this point, between 1970 and 2018, there were only four election cycles (1974, 1980, 2010, and 2012) that saw more House electoral defeats than retirements. In comparison, in the twelve election cycles between 1946 and 1968, electoral defeats outpaced retirements in all but two: 1952 and 1968. See [www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/](http://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/) (accessed January 31, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Even less research has been done on appointments to fill Senate vacancies, but see Brant and Overby (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Following Masthay and Overby (2017), we include cabinet and cabinet-like positions as displaying progressive ambition, though some analyses have not. Also following Masthay and Overby (2017), we do not include in our progressive ambition category senators who decided to pursue other offices after they had departed the Senate (*e.g.*, Fred Thompson [R-TN], who contended for the GOP presidential nomination five years after departing the Senate); nor do we include those who went on to high profile appointed non-governmental positions (*e.g.*, David Boren [D-OK], who served as the president of the University of Oklahoma), nor those subsequently confirmed to cabinet positions significantly after their retirement (*e.g.*, Chuck



Hagel [R-NE], who was confirmed as Secretary of Defense four years after departing the Senate). In those cases in which progressively ambitious senators continued to serve briefly in a succeeding Congress after winning election to another office, we count them as retiring from their last full Congress, since that is the final Congress for which we have D-NOMINATE scores for use in multivariate analyses).

<sup>4</sup> We do not include deaths in office (of which there have been 136 since 1919, and 301 overall) (see Brant, *et al.* 2018) for two reasons. First, with the possible exception of suicides (of which there were four in the period), deaths in office cannot be said to represent voluntary career decisions, which are the focus of our interests. Second, deaths are spread more randomly over the course of a Congress and are, therefore, more likely to result in interim, gubernatorial appointments, which complicate whether the subsequent campaign to fill the seat is truly open. We will return to discuss deaths in office more below.

<sup>5</sup> Another way of conceptualizing this difference is that over the first 20 Congresses in our time series (66<sup>th</sup>-85<sup>th</sup>), electoral defeats were in the double digits over half the time ( $n = 11$ ), whereas after the 85<sup>th</sup> Congress, there is only one case of such high rates of defeat (13 in the 96<sup>th</sup> Congress). In contrast, prior to the 86<sup>th</sup> there are only two Congresses that witnessed double digit voluntary departures, but six afterwards.

<sup>6</sup> We do not include in this number senators (such as David Vitter, R-LA) who unsuccessfully ran for governor (in his case in 2015) and then stepped down from the Senate later (in his case announcing retirement the following year).

<sup>7</sup> Two senators have gone to Justice and Interior, and one each to the Departments of Defense, Navy, Health and Human Services, Treasury, Justice (Attorney General), and Director of National Intelligence.

<sup>8</sup> Josiah Wolcott (D-DE) departed the 67<sup>th</sup> Congress to serve as the chancellor of the Delaware Court of Chancery; Gordon Humphrey (R-NH) retired from the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress to take a seat in the New Hampshire House of Representatives. According to the way we typically conceptualize such matters, Wolcott's decision is easier to understand since Delaware's Court of Chancery, as its website states, "is widely recognized as the nation's preeminent forum for the determination of disputes involving the internal affairs of the thousands upon thousands of Delaware corporations and other business entities through which a vast amount of the world's commercial affairs is conducted. Its unique competence in and exposure to issues of business law are unmatched" (<https://courts.delaware.gov/chancery/>).

<sup>9</sup> Which is not to say that there have not been recent examples of former senators accepting ambassadorial posts. Dan Coats (R-IN) served as ambassador to Germany (2001-2005) between his two stints in the Senate; Jeff Flake (R-AZ) is the current ambassador to Turkey; and Tom Udall (D-NM) is the current ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa. But in each case, the diplomatic appointment was made significantly after the individual left the Senate.

<sup>10</sup> Whether or not this partisan balance continues is, of course, an open question. In two of the three most recent congresses (the 115<sup>th</sup> and 117<sup>th</sup>), GOP voluntary departures have significantly outpaced Democrats. In the 117<sup>th</sup>, this was a rate of five to one: Blunt [MO], Burr [NC], Portman [OH], Shelby [AL], and Toomey [PA] on the Republican side versus Leahy [VT] among Democrats.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that most voluntary departures from the Senate clump at the end of the six-year term. In our sample, only 58 senators (17 percent) resigned or retired before the end of their term (most recently Al Franken [D-MN] and Kamala Harris [D-CA]). In our analysis we do not distinguish between replacements chosen in special versus general elections. It is also worth

noting that in our seat retention analyses, we do not consider the case of Vice President Harris's former seat, since at the time of our analysis it was held by a gubernatorial appointee, Alex Padilla.

<sup>12</sup> We code the 107th Congress as having a Democratic majority, since Democrats controlled the chamber at the end of that Congress (subsequent to Jim Jeffords' decision in May 2001 to leave the Republican party and, as an independent, caucus with Democrats).

<sup>13</sup> First differences are calculated using Clarify (Kings, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000) by changing variables from 0 to 1 (*e.g.*, from Democrat to Republican).

<sup>14</sup> In future work on this topic, we plan to explore possible partisan asymmetries more fully. Among other facets, this might include examining party disparities in the number of candidates, campaign spending, and primary vitriol associated with contesting to hold vacated Senate seats.