Self-Interest and Legislative Turnover

Decisions of legislators to run for reelection or retire from office have attracted scholarly attention for a variety of reasons. In the study of Congress, for example, the goal of winning reelection has become the driving assumption in explaining much of Congressional behavior, including the emphasis on casework, positioning on committees and subcommittees, issue selection, expense allowances, and in general the success of members against most challengers (Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974; Kingdon, 1977, Fiorina, 1977). For Congress, the goal of winning reelection, while not universally pursued by members (e.g., see Cooper and West, 1981; Hibbing, 1982), seems to be nevertheless a dominant motivation. Most observers of Congress worry about the lack of turnover and the "insulation" of members.

Almost by tradition, the concern of state legislative observers has been the very opposite. High turnover rather than low turnover is the cause for concern. The historical basis for this concern is demonstrated in Ray's (1974) three-state study of Connecticut, Michigan, and Wisconsin. He demonstrates that at the turn of the century the turnover rates in these three states were between 60 and 80 percent. By the 1930s the turnover rate in ten state houses was estimated at slightly less than 40 percent.

Much of this chapter appeared in an article that was written while the book was in progress. See Wayne L. Francis and John R. Baker, "Why Do U.S. State Legislators Vacate Their Seats?" Legislative Studies Quarterly 11 (1986): 119–126.
percent (Hyneman, 1938), but by the 1960s estimates were still in excess of 35 percent (Rosenthal, 1974b). In most recent years (1978–82), the rates have declined further, and as pointed out by Wiggins and Bernick (1977), the problem of turnover is no longer so apparent. Recent data indicate that the turnover rate ranges from approximately 25 to 32 percent (Council of State Governments, 1980–1984). Incentives for reelection do vary considerably from state to state, and they may be changing as states make changes in compensation and session requirements.

There are two basic reasons why scholars become concerned with high turnover. First, the legislature may lack the experienced members necessary to manage its business efficiently. Expertise is needed in committee negotiations, and in general it helps to have “a memory” of the procedures of government and of past decisions. Second, high turnover may reflect the inability to recruit or retain quality members, which suggests further that there may be a problem in the incentive structure. That is, if members exit the legislature because they were defeated in the primary or general election, so be it. That is the way the game is played. But if they leave for other reasons, it will pay to take a closer look at the problem.

One principal reason for a member to leave office voluntarily is to challenge another candidate for a more desirable position. In 1957, a four-state interview study of California, Ohio, New Jersey, and Tennessee revealed that more than one-third of nearly five hundred legislators had definite aspirations to higher office and another one-fourth thought that running for higher office was at least a possibility (Eulau, et al., in Marvick, 1961, p. 255). Following up on the careers of these members through 1971, Hain (1974) has shown that “progressive ambitions” are highly related to age. More important for our purposes here is Hain’s verification that a high percentage of state legislators in fact do seek “higher” office. In the original sample, 59 percent expressed progressive ambitions. Hain found that 44 percent actually did seek another office.

Decisions to leave the legislature may be due to a number of factors. Blair and Henry (1981), for example, examined fifty-six voluntary retirees who did not run immediately for another office. They found that personal factors (especially family related) were the most frequently cited (82%), but that professional (48%) and political (23%) factors were apparent also. Even those who did run immediately for another office may have had other reasons for their exit. Thus, the decision to leave can be seen as a complex weighing of the costs and benefits of the...
available alternatives. It is the purpose of this chapter to investigate this decision process.

The 1981–82 memberships of the Indiana and Missouri legislatures provide the data for this examination. Serving in those years were 50 members of the Indiana senate and 99 members of the house. Missouri had 34 senate and 163 house members. Both chambers of Indiana were controlled by Republicans, whereas the Democrats had their typical large majorities in the Missouri legislature. In 1981 the average number of “workdays” in all state legislatures was 75. Indiana had 84 workdays and Missouri had 97. Annual legislative salaries plus expenses were estimated at $11,000 for Indiana and $18,400 for Missouri. For all states the mean salary plus expense level is estimated at $13,500 for 1981. Special sessions allow a per diem but no additional salary. In 1981 Indiana spent three days in special session, whereas Missouri spent about ten days. Total compensation per day of work is estimated at $127 for Indiana and $129 for Missouri.

Slightly more than 25 percent of the 1981–82 membership did not return for the 1983–84 term. Excluding those senators who were not up for reelection, 29 percent were either defeated or left office. By chamber these turnover figures are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chamber</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indiana House</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>36% (9 of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri House</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>41% (7 of 17)</td>
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In these two states a total of 89 members did not return for the 1983 session. Of the 89, 63 left for reasons other than election defeat. In other words, about 71 percent of the turnover is due to reasons other than election defeat. This compares to 63 percent for the Blair and Henry data for Arkansas for 1970–78, 63–70 percent for the multistate data of Calvert (1979) for 1966–76, and 68.5 percent for the early Hyneman data.

The sixty-three members of the Indiana and Missouri legislatures who voluntarily retired in 1982 were sent questionnaires in an attempt to evaluate their decisions. Of these members, forty-three (68%) responded satisfactorily.1 In the central question, legislators were asked to

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1. In Indiana 36% (9 of 25) of the voluntary retirees were from the minority party. This compares to 34% for the entire legislative membership. In Missouri 42% (16 of 38) were from the minority party, compared to 32% for the full membership. Among the returns from retired members, minority party members constituted 21% of the total for Indiana and 41% for Missouri. Although we might suspect that minority party members would
indicate which of the following reasons were appropriate in explaining their decision not to seek reelection:

a. Decided to run for another office.
b. Health or retirement.
c. Dissatisfaction with legislative experience (or the legislature).
d. Needed to spend more time in my private occupation or business.
e. Was offered a more attractive career position.
f. Family needs.
g. Adverse political circumstances in my district.
h. Other

Respondents could give more than one reason, and more than half did. Where possible, responses in "h" were recoded in "a" through "g."

In order to better comprehend the diverse responses to the above question, the results have been organized under five main categories:

1. Opportunity Costs.
2. Legislative Dissatisfaction.
3. Career Ambitions.
4. Health or Normal Retirement Age.
5. Electoral Expectations.

Opportunity costs are those benefits that legislators forego because they must serve in the legislature. Most legislators in the states under study (and probably in most other states as well) have private occupations or businesses that both produce income and require at least part of their time and energy. Workdays in the state capitol take legislators away from these income producing activities. Workdays in the state capitol also take many legislators away from their families and those benefits that come in the form of leisure and personal satisfaction in the home or family environment.

Of the forty-three respondents in this study, seventeen were classified as indicating that opportunity costs were important in their decisions to leave. The frequencies can be illustrated as follows:

have greater reason to voluntarily retire, the above evidence gives only weak (if any) support to this notion. In examining reasons for retirement, as discussed later, majority-minority status was not found to illustrate major differences with sufficient statistical certainty, although with a larger N a number of distinctions may emerge.
Several legislators were apparently in the position of having to give up one of three responsibilities. The legislative responsibility was infringing upon both the family and the private business of the member. In only one case were family needs named without also naming the need to spend more time in private business. The single exception was a member whose spouse was quite ill. The findings here modify the Blair-Henry study in which greater emphasis was given to the "family" as a reason for retirement.

Dissatisfaction with recent legislative experience also may be an important factor in voluntary retirement. Seven of the forty-three respondents were explicit in this regard. Contrary to what one might expect, members who expressed this dissatisfaction were on all measures very active members of the legislature. All seven either were committee chairs or served on finance or appropriation committees. Six of seven were above the mean in their chamber party in: (1) the quantity of legislation sponsored which passed the chamber, and (2) the percent of legislation sponsored which passed the chamber. Six of the seven were majority party members. Confirmation of their dissatisfaction is noted in their responses to a separate item in which they were asked to rate on a five point scale how "rewarding" they found their last term of service. The following representation illustrates the difference between these dissatisfied members and their retiring colleagues:

\[
\begin{align*}
(N = 34) & \quad \text{Most Retirees} & x &= 1.97 \\
(N = 7) & \quad \text{Dissatisfied Retirees} & x &= 3.27
\end{align*}
\]

1  Very Rewarding
2  Usually Rewarding
3  Rewarding only part of the time
4  Usually not rewarding
5  Not rewarding at all

In sum, the members who indicated dissatisfaction with their legislative experience as a reason for retiring were distinct from other retirees on a Likert-type scale item as well. These dissatisfied respondents appeared to be active and potentially influential members of their chamber. In addition, none of them indicated that they had retired to run for another
office. Several of these members indicated that they were either frustrated by their experience or “burned out.” A contributing factor in a majority of cases was also the member’s need to spend more time in his or her business or occupation.

In a third important group are those legislators whose career ambitions lead them to vacate their seat to run for another office. Almost half of those who left voluntarily (21 of 43) immediately sought another office. In addition, members may accept other types of career positions in public life, such as in the state or federal bureaucracy, or the state or federal judiciary. Two members in our sample accepted appointments in federal agencies. Among those seeking elective office, several were house members seeking a senate seat. Others ran for Congress, and in some cases a local office was sought. Four of our six women respondents in this survey left to run for another office.

Of those twenty-one members who sought another office, fifteen offered no other reason for vacating their seat. Eight of the respondents wanted to move to the state senate, and others obviously wanted higher office to satisfy their career ambitions. Five of the six who gave more complex responses indicated that they needed to spend more time in their business or occupation (the sixth mentioned health). At least three of these six ran for local office (two for prosecuting attorney), and one ran for Congress. The member who ran for Congress gave a succinct explanation for his decision:

Thus the decision was made to run for Congress and either “get in” full time in politics if I won, or “get out” if I lost and devote “full-time” to my business.

As we could have predicted from Hain’s career study, those who left to run for another office were a younger group than those who left for other reasons—a mean of forty-two years of age as compared to fifty-three. By the evidence in the official records, most of those who vacated their seat to run for another office did not appear well integrated into the formal power structure of their chamber. None of the four majority party senators held a committee chairmanship in 1981, and only one served on a committee dealing with taxation, appropriations, or budget. The three house members from Indiana also did not serve on the “money” committees, nor did the single majority member hold a committee chairmanship. Only in the 163-member Missouri house did those seeking another office appear in this respect to be typical of the chamber as a whole. Members who are seeking another office may in fact avoid
heavy responsibilities in their chamber in order to devote more time to building a campaign.

The progressive ambitions of members in this study may be demonstrated more clearly by their bill sponsorship activity. They may sponsor a higher volume of successful bills than those who merely sought re-election to their own seats. To make this comparison, the data (taken from the official legislative journals and indexes) were broken down by state, chamber, and party—for three reasons. First, the states have different rules for processing legislation. Second, members in the smaller senates tend to sponsor more bills (mean number of sponsorships among senators is 25.7 for Indiana and 15.1 for Missouri, whereas for House members it is 11.7 and 6.1 respectively). Finally, majority party members tend to have greater success with their legislation. For example, the mean sponsorship success rate for getting bills through the chamber was 34 percent for majority members in the two states, but only 19 percent for minority party members. The pattern holds for all four chambers. This process of sorting by state, chamber, and party status produces eight subgroups.

Within each subgroup it is possible to compare the success of bills of those who sought reelection with the success of those who sought another office. Because of the small number of cases in the latter group, the results need to be combined in some way to gain statistical confidence. We ask whether members seeking another office were above or below the mean of the reelection seekers in their subgroup. We find that in two-thirds of the cases (14 of 21) those seeking another office did sponsor more successful bills than the mean rate of the reelection seekers in their respective subgroups. This tendency will require further confirmation, but it is apparent that those seeking other offices were active in sponsoring legislation and were at least as successful as those who continued on in their legislative chamber.

In addition to legislators who retire because of opportunity costs, or dissatisfaction with the legislature, or progressive ambitions, there are those who have health problems or who reach what they consider to be normal retirement age. Seven of the forty-three respondents indicated that at least one of these factors was a consideration in their retirement from the legislature. As expected, most of these members were in an advanced age group. These personal reasons seem theoretically uninteresting, but they do constitute a part of legislative turnover.

In a final residual group, four legislators indicated that they did not run again at least partly because of electoral expectations, that is, be-
cause of adverse political circumstances in their districts. With only four cases, an evaluation is not appropriate, but it would seem that these legislators might be similar to those members who ran again but lost in the primary. The four members in this category apparently predicted they might lose and therefore did not run. Other members probably would not have run had they thought they would not win.

To summarize, legislators who voluntarily vacate their seats do so for a variety of reasons, the most common of which are: (1) the opportunity costs associated with their private occupation and (2) the prospects for career advancement in public office. Important also are opportunity costs associated with the family, dissatisfaction with legislative experience, health or age related considerations, and electoral expectations. The frequency of response offered in each of these categories is illustrated in Table 6.1.

A degree of caution needs to be taken when interpreting the results. While the question posed to each respondent offered a balance of options, it is nevertheless possible that some respondents were reluctant to indicate the full range of their reasons. Dissatisfaction with legislative service, for example, may be more common among respondents than has been shown. In addition, those who indicated only that they sought another office may have had reasons for doing so that were not revealed. Finally, at least some of the nonrespondents may have had more personal reasons for retiring, such as those that were found in the full sample study of Blair and Henry.

In conclusion, this analysis has shown that legislative turnover across the nation at the state level has continued to decline, but that still about 70 percent of the turnover in our selected states (Indiana and Missouri) is due to voluntary retirement. Approximately 21 percent of those legislators who were up for reelection did not run for the same seat (either in the primary or general election). Our sample suggests that about 10 percent ran for another office and that the other 10 or 11 percent chose to return to private status. Only about 8 percent of those whose seats were up for reelection actually lost the seat at the polls. A few (four in our sample) vacated their seats to avoid a possible loss.

In his study of risk-bearing and progressive ambition in Congress, Rohde (1979) was able to assume that returning to private status is an undesirable alternative except in very unusual circumstances. Historically, the return to private status has been a more viable option for state legislators. This study details some of the reasons and their significance. In recent years state legislatures have been changing from part-time to
full-time duty—meeting every year in longer sessions and in special sessions. The states are in different stages in this evolution. Future analysis would benefit by contrasting those that assume full-time duty with those that are strictly part-time. Indiana and Missouri are in the middle of this distribution. We would expect that the nature of voluntary retirement would be a reflection of those incentives that attract members to the legislature in the first place.

As legislative service becomes more demanding of members’ time, we would expect fewer legislators with lucrative private occupations to make a bid for a seat, unless, of course, there is a marked increase in legislative compensation. The increase in time demands make it more likely that candidates will see themselves as full-time professionals rather than part-time citizens. Incentives to institutionalize the committee and leadership structure become more attractive. Members may have aspirations for higher office, but a career in the legislature can be made appealing also. It is in the interest of members with long-term interests in public office to improve their options.

The three major options or alternatives confronted by legislators are:

- $a_1$ Run again for the same office
- $a_2$ Run for a “higher” office
- $a_3$ Retire from office (returning to private status)
The decision of each legislator will depend on the expected utility of each option. Borrowing from the formalization of Rohde (1979; also see Riker and Ordeshook, 1973, ch. 3), the expected utility of each option may be stated as follows:

\[ E(a_1) = P_1(O_1) U(O_1) - C(a_1) \]
\[ E(a_2) = P_2(O_2) U(O_2) - C(a_2) \]
\[ E(a_3) = U(O_3) - C(a_3) \]

where \( P_i \) is the probability that outcome \( j \) will occur if alternative \( i \) is selected, \( U(O_j) \) is the utility to the legislators if outcome \( j \) is selected, \( C(a_i) \) is the direct utility cost of selecting alternative \( i \), and \( O_1, O_2, \) and \( O_3 \) are the outcomes corresponding to the listed alternatives.

The above equations assume that a legislator must give up one office to run for another and that \( P = 1.0 \). Generally, we would expect that the probability of winning a higher office is substantially less than that of winning reelection to the same seat, thus even though the potential benefits derived from higher office are greater, they are usually more than offset by the low probability of winning. In the two-state study there were 304 seats on the line. Approximately 79 percent of the incumbents chose alternative \( a_1 \), and only about 8 percent did not succeed in regaining their seats. Alternatives \( a_2 \) and \( a_3 \) were selected with about equal frequency by the other incumbents. Thus when chances are four out of five that legislators will seek reelection, the desire to build up the attractiveness of continued service is likely to be widespread. Institutionalization of the committee system is one way to do it.

It is in the self-interest of members to create a committee system that distributes widely the benefits to be had in the form of legislation. In some instances this will mean nothing more than claiming credit for legislation to satisfy constituents who may be influential in the next election. In other cases, ideological differences may be at stake. In any case, the situation is far different than it was at the turn of the century, when legislators had a very limited interest in state legislative service.

Thus in spite of the dissatisfaction that may be created by excessive numbers of workdays in the state capitols (as implied by the findings in chapter 5), 80 percent of the legislators choose nevertheless to seek reelection to the same seat. With a 90 percent chance of success, such as in Indiana or Missouri, other options become less attractive. In this respect the state legislative incentive system is becoming much more like that of Congress. As legislators see the prospect of a career, they are
more likely to want the institutionalization of incentives in the conduct of official business. Chair and committee assignments take on added importance. They are likely to want visible benefits in the form of legislation, and time away from the state capitol may be valued more for shoring up political support, as in the case of members of Congress (e.g., see Parker, 1986), than for outside business or personal activities. Even now many state legislators maintain offices in their districts, and such a phenomenon may be the next wave in state legislative elaboration of the office.