



Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers: Ambition, Competition, and Rotation

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*Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers: Ambition, Competition, and Rotation**

The growing careerism of congressmen at the turn of the century has been widely viewed as a chief cause for the modernization of the House of Representatives. Thus, a prominent concern of recent research in congressional development has been the reasons for career development at that time. In this paper I attempt to distinguish the effects of three contributors to the nineteenth century turnover: competition, rotation, and ambition. After analyzing six decades of nineteenth-century congressional elections, I found that all three variables served to reduce turnover toward the end of the century, but that the decline in voluntary retirement, reflecting political ambition, was the primary contributor to increased membership stability.

I had been elected for a third term, the elections then being the year before the commencement of the term. But, on my return home after the close of my second term, I resigned my third term. I was pleased with political life, and my prospects were encouraging. Had I been affluent, or without a family, I would have preferred to continue in public life. But, poor, and having a growing family, I felt a paramount and sacred obligation to give up my political prospects, and devote myself to my profession and my wife and children.

George Robertson, *An Outline of the
Life of George Robertson*, 1876, p. 56.

Among students of Congress' development there is general agreement that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the House of Representatives was transformed from a debating arena to an ongoing, professionalized work organization (Polsby, 1975). By the second decade of the twentieth century a network of autonomous committees was in place, internal mobility and leadership recruitment had become rationalized, and expertise had emerged as a primary criterion in allocating status among

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members.¹ Several explanations for the House's modernization are available. If one assumes—as the “open system” approach of organization theory does—that environment determines structure, the increasing decentralization of the House during this period would appear to reflect the growing volume and variety of external demands.² But such an assumption is difficult to make. There is no imperative dictating that an organization must adapt to its environment. A casual survey of the internal features of national legislatures reveals that structural adaptation to complex environments is clearly exceptional for organizations of that genus.³

Another familiar explanation looks to specific historical occurrences at the turn of the century. As sharp ideological cleavages surfaced within the political parties, party leadership declined as a legitimate agent of coordination. The Revolt of 1910 offers dramatic evidence on the effects of ideological conflict on House procedures (Jones, 1971; Polsby, 1969, pp. 798–802). To fill the resulting vacuum, a system of rules and procedures—such as seniority—formed to coordinate the House's activities. These rules continue to define the character of the House today. But such an explanation is only partly satisfying. The decentralizing thrust began well before the breakdown of “party government”; seniority, for example, was a dominant norm in the selection of committee chairmen as far back as the 1880s. Even the reputedly autocratic Speaker Reed compensated almost all “violations” of seniority in committee chairmanship appointments (Polsby, 1969). The weakening legitimacy of party may help to explain the timing of climactic events, but alone it cannot explain the character or permanence of the change.

¹For discussions of the committee system and leadership selection, see Polsby (1968), Cooper (1970), and French (1915, pp. 68–92); the change in the normative system of the House is more difficult to assess precisely, but the indirect and anecdotal evidence is impressive. Where accounts of Congress during the mid-nineteenth century recognized oratory and wit as desirable congressional skills, by the turn of the century the Democratic Speaker Champ Clark was observing, “. . . committee work gives little reputation to members of the committee *except among their fellows*,” and he added “good committee work leads to promotion” (Clark, 1920, pp. 202–203). Even floor reputations were tied to committee status since only the specialists from the committees were given charge of floor consideration of a committee's legislative proposals. A norm of reciprocity prevailed within and among committees in which recommendations from specialized committees were accepted (French, 1915).

²Lawrence and Lorsch's *Organization and Environment* (1967) is perhaps the most noted representation of this view. See Child (1972, pp. 3–5) and Thompson (1967) for summaries of the “open system” approach.

³And business history is replete with examples of firms which did not diversify or discover the multidivisional structure in time (Chandler, 1962, Ch. 7); Child (1972) argues forcefully against environmental determinism.

Perhaps the prime reason for the transformation of the House can be found in the changing needs and incentives of congressmen. From the Civil War through the 1920s the House membership stabilized. Whether measured by the average length of service, the percent first term (Polsby, 1967), or the percent of incumbents replaced to control for the creation of new seats (Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel, 1975), there appears to have been near linear growth of congressional careerism during this period. From 1860 to 1920, for example, the average length of service doubled from four to eight years. As more incumbents returned and as the sessions grew longer, the House moved from a temporary way-station where anonymous amateurs and professional politicians alike stopped over on their way to other careers, to a stable social system with all its trappings. Not surprisingly, a House culture evolved governing interpersonal relations, conferring status upon its members, and prescribing appropriate role behavior.

With the breakdown of the congressional parties, a House full of careerists was ripe for change. The reform emphasis on specialization and decentralization could hardly have been more satisfying to the careerist orientation. Specialization made the job more interesting and rewarded the representative with influence in his policy area. Decentralization assured him and the committee where he worked some measure of freedom from interference, and created numerous leadership positions within the House (Polsby, 1968, pp. 164–167). Moreover, investing one's life work in the House became safer as automatic rules replaced the Speaker's discretion in determining committee advancement. A member merely had to win reelection and outlive his colleagues to ensure his advancement. If the environment suggested a complex division of labor and the party system made change possible, the increasingly careerist orientation of its members can be viewed as providing the House with the necessary impetus for structural change.

Sources of Increasing Membership Stability

A number of forces have been suggested to explain declining turnover during the late nineteenth century, three of which appear important enough to have substantially altered the character of the House's membership.⁴ They are

⁴ Two explanations which do not seem to employ variables of sufficient scale are the changing demography of the House membership and the apparent high turnover due simply to the addition of new seats until the early twentieth century. Richard Witmer (1964, pp. 529–530), in an analysis complete with actuarial tables, suggests that the decreasing average age of entry of congressmen at the turn of the century gave them more years of opportunity. This might be important if death or genuine retirement were

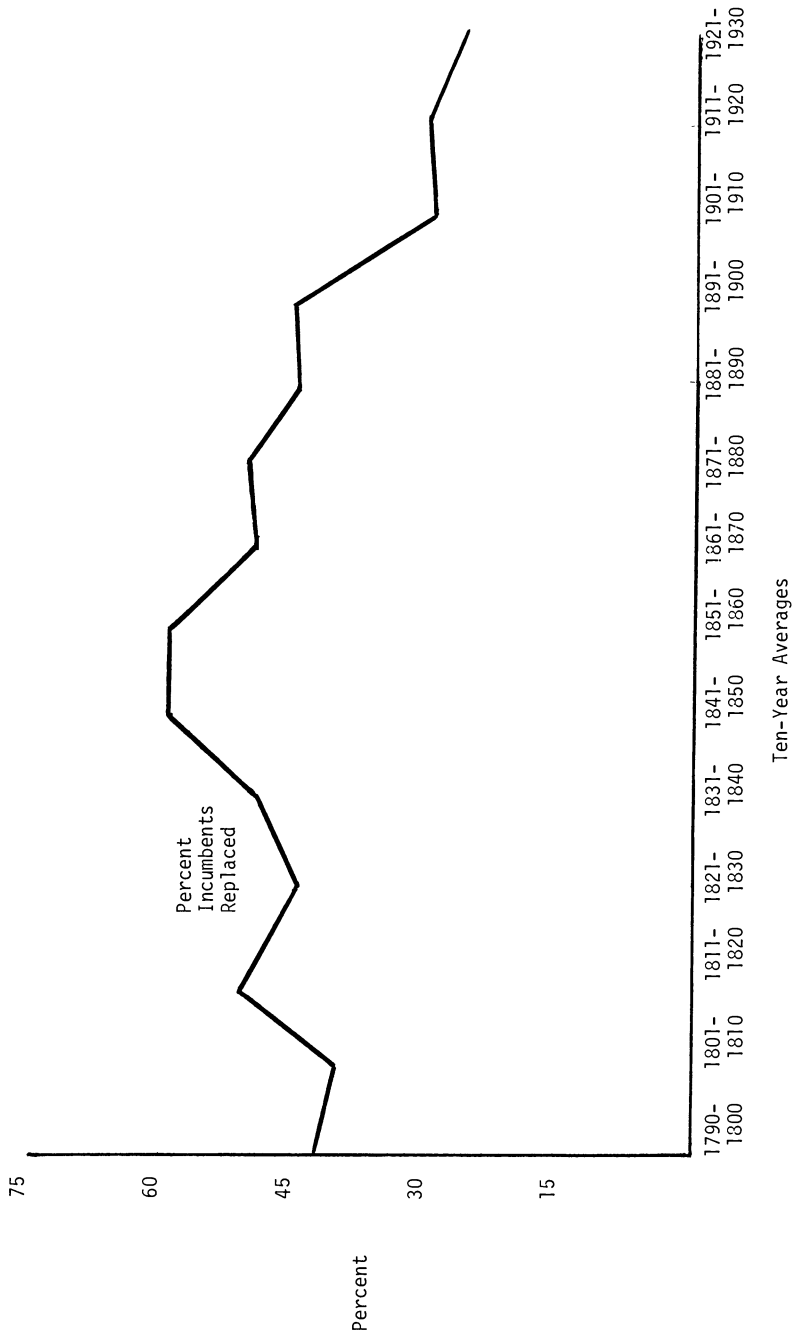
declining party competition, the increasing attractiveness of the House as a career, and the disappearance of local district norms which required incumbent congressmen to retire after a specified period of service. Unfortunately, none of these explanations has received much investigation, and we presently have little basis for choosing among them. After briefly describing each, we shall assess their influence on decreasing congressional turnover.

Declining Party Competition

The most popular explanation in the literature holds simply that strong party competition throughout most of the nineteenth century precluded much consideration of a long-term stay in Washington for most congressmen. Our image of congressional elections during this period is one of fiercely combative affairs which by modern standards produced intense voter interest, large turnout, and close elections. According to Burnham (1965), "The late nineteenth century voting universe was marked by a more complete and intensely party-oriented voting participation among the American electorate than ever before or since." And H. Douglas Price (1975) has found that defeat explained a higher share of congressional turnover in 1884 than in 1834. The use of party ballots produced extremely high levels of straight party voting for every office from President down to Registrar of the Deeds. This meant that congressional election results were closely tied to a volatile presidential vote. Even incumbents who had managed to win several successive elections were not immune from defeat. Not until the adoption of the Australian ballot throughout the country in the late 1890s did many congressmen have much prospect of "controlling" their district (Rusk, 1970).

Schattschneider (1956) and Price (1975) have given the election of 1896 special credit for creating numerous safe congressional seats. For the first time many congressmen could view the House as a long-term prospect, and according to Price, a greater number of incumbents began to seek reelection. The Schattschneider-Price thesis is attractive in that the 1896 realignment timely predates the more dramatic House reforms by about fifteen years, thus giving legislative professionalism a chance to grow. Also, if one looks closely

the main reason for turnover. With the average length of service being about eight years, however, and with so few dying in office, such an explanation begs the question. Morningstar's (1967) research into post-congressional careers shows ex-congressmen during the early and late periods to be very much alive. H. Douglas Price dismisses the explanation that high turnover prior to the turn of the century was an artifact of new seats. Controlling for this, the growth of careerism remains unabated (1975, pp. 10-11).



^aCalculated from Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel, Table 1.

FIGURE 1

The Decline of Congressional Turnover During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century^a

at the replacement trend in Figure 1, turnover appears to decline more sharply after 1896 than before. Price gives special significance to the fact that when the new Congress convened in 1901, for the first time less than thirty percent of its members were freshmen. Despite these features, the 1896 realignment and ballot reform fall short of fully explaining the rise of careerism. The decline of congressional turnover had begun in the 1870s and was well underway before either the 1896 election or ballot reform. They may have complemented and hastened the growth of careerism, but neither can serve as an all-encompassing explanation. Before party competition can be accepted as the primary determinant of decreasing turnover, it must also account for the substantial decline prior to the 1890s. There is little support for such a theory in the literature.⁵

Growing Attractiveness of the House

A second explanation, which has received universal recognition but limited investigation, argues that congressional turnover was largely voluntary. A number of factors may have contributed to making the House more attractive, but the emerging role of the national government in making the nation's significant political decisions must have been of major importance. The adoption of tariff barriers to protect domestic industries for every product from "agate to zinc," for example, meant that the economic welfare of communities throughout the country became tied to national policies. Moreover, the tariff produced substantial treasury surpluses, and congressmen found themselves in the happy dilemma of how to spend the revenues as a growing number of solicitous groups offered suggestions. As Congress became a more authoritative locus of public policy, the job of congressman became more important and probably more prestigious, and the hardships in turn became more endurable. For the amateur, however, the hardships became *less* endurable. Heavier workloads and longer sessions meant longer absences from home and business. Slowly, the amateurs were replaced by the professionals. Unlike the explanation derived from party competition, such an argument

⁵From an elaborate statistical analysis of the incumbent replacement trend (see Figure 1), Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel (1975, Appendix) concluded that the level of party competition characteristic of each party system helps to explain the secular decline in congressional turnover. But since the critical period of turnover for the House's development occurred *during* the third party system (1854–1896), their study provides little evidence on the underlying causal forces. Also, for a realignment argument of careerism see King and Seligman (1976, chapter 10).

describes evolutionary change and is more compatible with the turnover trend in Figure 1.

The Decline of Local District Norms

A third explanation views congressional turnover as an artifact of politics among segmented communities. Congressional districts in the nineteenth century were artificial political units which generally subsumed several or more separate communities. With few political organizations extending beyond their local towns and counties, district nominating caucuses were pluralistic, frequently fragmented affairs with each local organization sponsoring its own candidate. Since the caucus generally convened solely to nominate the party's congressional candidate, there was little basis for exchange or compromise, and thus aggravated conflict was commonplace. Champ Clark describes how Missouri's "Fighting Ninth" congressional district, notorious for its caucus disputes, found a solution.

In 1886 we went through the very same performance, except that one candidate had died, one had dropped out, and a new one was added. We had two conventions, with an aggregate of over four thousand ballots. Judge Robinson came within one vote of getting the nomination and could not get it, so, to spite his enemy, Norton, he threw his strength to Colonel Hutton and nominated him again. In this way Colonel Hutton, who had no such following as Robinson or Norton, and who spent no money and little time or energy in campaigning, served two terms in Congress.

In 1888, all of them that were alive ran again, except Colonel Hutton, with one new man added to the list. They had a deadlock convention at Warrenton. Somebody suggested that as Norton and Robinson—the two leading candidates—were cutting each other's throats all the time, others being the beneficiaries of their warfare, both of them could go to Congress if they would flip a dollar for the nomination, the one winning to go the first two terms and the one defeated to go the next two terms. So they flipped the dollar. Colonel Norton won, was nominated and elected by a reduced majority, which was not to his discredit, as the feeling was so intense that any other candidate would have received a reduced majority. (Clark, 1920, p. 166)

This was not a novel idea; districts throughout the country had long found rotation of the nomination to be an acceptable method for resolving conflict.

We know very little about the origins and extent of rotation. Frederick Dallinger, writing the "definitive" statement on *Nominations For Elective Office in United States* in 1903, included a bare sentence on the subject.⁶

⁶ Dallinger noted, "The nomination of a congressional candidate is often determined in advance by a private agreement that the incumbent, after one or more terms of service, shall retire and aid the nomination of his principal rival in a former convention"

With fragmentary evidence from historical sources, however, we can sketch its general contours. Depending on the configurations of party politics in a district, rotation was not always based on geography. In some districts rotation appears simply as a convenient way of allowing aspiring politicians to gain experience and exposure for future elections to state offices. In a few areas the rotation period was a strict “one term and out.” Oregon followed this prescription without exception until the twentieth century, and Lincoln’s career, as well as the nation’s history, may have looked far different had local rules not forced him out of the House after his first term. Much more common, however, was a two-term limit. In a study of the 1866 Republican nominating caucuses, Lawrence Powell (1973) found that 7 of the 17 Republican incumbents who were rejected for renomination fell under a local two-term limit rule. He also suggests that 37 of the Republican incumbents who did not stand for reelection “probably retired voluntarily in deference to rotation understandings” (p. 235).

Rotation appears to have been prevalent in every region other than the South. Although Southern state legislative seats were commonly rotated, there is little evidence of the practice operating at the congressional level (Wooster, 1969, pp. 42, 92–93). As rotation was spreading across the country in the 1840s and early 1850s, the South had perhaps already recognized the value of extended congressional service in protecting its “peculiar institution.” Horace Greeley singled out Northern rotation practices as the main reason for Southern domination of ante-bellum Congresses. Southerners seized control “in legislative bodies from their familiarity with rules and machinery whereas new men are obliged to spend half the session in acquiring the requisite knowledge. . . . If the constituencies of Northern states had been so sagacious as their opponents in this respect, there would have been far less opportunity for complaint of Southern aggression in Congress” (Cited in Powell, 1973, p. 236). And in 1866 Greeley admonished his fellow New York Republicans: “Depend on it our state must upset this fashion of giving every county ‘its turn’ and dismissing each member after four years of faithful service before she can have her due weight in Congress.”

Rotation waned during the last half of the nineteenth century, and by the twentieth century it had disappeared altogether. At least two forces operated

(Dallinger, 1903). Leonard D. White in *The Jacksonians* (1954, chs. 16 and 17) examines the rotation rules in the federal service as it complemented the spoils system. He observed earlier, however, in *The Jeffersonians* (1951, p. 397) that rotation practices originated with elective office and cites the fact that by 1830 fifteen states required rotation of the office of governor.

to end the practice. First, congressmen who found the House an attractive career prospect increasingly challenged rotation. Through adroit use of patronage or by swamping the district convention with supportive delegates, enterprising incumbents occasionally succeeded in subverting the traditional two-term limit. Second, during the late 1890s and early 1900s the vestiges of rotation were eliminated with the nationwide substitution of the direct primary for the party caucus. Contemporaries and historians alike have generally interpreted primary reform as a frontal assault against political parties and politicians. Perhaps we should not take so undifferentiated a view of politicians in describing the effects of primary reform during this period. Party organizations and their leaders may have suffered, but officeholders prospered. Nominating caucuses were frequently unpredictable affairs with local party leaders, if anyone, controlling the outcome. Rather than dominating the caucus, the incumbent congressman frequently found himself in the role of supplicant. Direct primaries liberated the congressman from the caucus and allowed him to employ proven campaign skills and the resources of office to maximum advantage. Campaign experience, recognition, franking privileges, and diligent constituent service gave the incumbent, then as today, a competitive edge over the other relatively unknown candidates in the primary. "The primary election method of nominating candidates for membership in the House," observed Clark (1920, p. 220), "helps the sitting member to retain his seat if he is at all worthy of it." The decline of rotation and its ultimate replacement by the direct primary may have directly contributed to reduced congressional turnover. Perhaps only as congressmen gained control of the nomination process did congressional careers blossom.

Competition, ambition, and rotation all appear to have been capable of replacing the House's amateur representatives with professionals. Evaluating their relative merits will not be easy. They were contemporaneous forces, and they may well have contributed similarly to changes in turnover. Moreover, we may suspect that they were causally inter-related. To the degree that strong competition and rotation practices made long-term congressional service unlikely, they reduced the attractiveness of the office. Politicians looked elsewhere simply because there was no future in the House. Conversely, if we discover competition declining over the second half of the nineteenth century, it may well have resulted from a greater number of incumbents seeking reelection. And as suggested above, incumbents anxious to return to Washington may have hastened the demise of rotation.

Such inter-relationships would be difficult to sort out even with ideal data. Unfortunately, our problem is compounded in that we shall be working with limited historical information. Of the three variables, only party competition

can be measured in a straightforward manner. Ambition and rotation, both of which operate on the nomination stage, cannot be directly measured, and we have to infer their influence by identifying patterns in congressional elections and careers. Obviously, precise specification of the relative contribution of ambition, competition, and rotation on congressional turnover will not be possible. In order to make an educated guess about their relative effects we shall first have to answer two questions: Is there good evidence of a direct relationship between each of these three variables and decreasing congressional turnover, and if so, does the relationship persist when controlling for the influence of the other variables which are potential sources of spuriousness?

Previous studies have focused almost exclusively on secular trends such as the one presented in Figure 1. Because these trends summarize the cumulative effect of nomination and election, they do not provide the best information for testing the alternative explanations which operate on both phases of the election process. We need to distinguish candidates who failed to run for reelection from those who ran and lost. Only recently have such data become available on a systematic basis. Over the years summary congressional election results in government publications and statistical almanacs have omitted the names of the losing candidates, and consequently, it has been impossible heretofore to determine at which stage—nomination or election—the incumbent dropped out. Through the cooperative effort of hundreds of scholars working with the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, this information has been recovered from the various state archives. From these files the names of the candidates and their parties were coded with the election outcome for 6579 congressional races during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ Specifically, elections were examined for six decades, four from the critical period of rapid decline in turnover (1870–1910), and for comparison, one each from the two pre-Civil War party systems.

⁷ These data have recently been published in the *Guide to U.S. Elections* (1975). The Introduction describes the herculean effort to compile these election statistics. Contested election outcomes are included in the analysis with successful contests considered as part of the election process. To avoid the potential artifact that declining competition might have been a result of a reduction in the number of successful contests, the analysis was repeated with contested elections eliminated from the data base. This produced no appreciable differences in the trends presented in the text.

<i>Years</i>	<i>Number of Elections</i>
1824–1830	410
1854–1860	890
1874–1880	1087
1884–1890	1287
1894–1900	1387
1904–1910	1518

Nineteenth century reapportionment may have had a disruptive effect on congressional careers. With a growing population necessitating periodic redistricting and highly partisan state legislatures redrawing the boundaries, some congressmen may have had their careers abruptly ended when redistricting carved up their formerly secure seats. In order to avoid the potentially contaminating effects of reapportionment on House turnover, we shall restrict the analysis to elections which did not immediately follow congressional redistricting.⁸

The Findings

Competition

In examining the relationship between party competition and congressional turnover we must recognize that during much of the nineteenth century political parties were unstable elements of the political universe. As parties came and went, incumbent congressmen would have to change their party affiliation. Thus, change in party control of a seat from one election to

⁸Fiorina, et al. (1975, Table 1A) discovered from their regression analysis that replacements were greater during reapportionment years. In a preliminary analysis of turnover data I have found that the percentage of congressmen not seeking reelection was greater immediately following reapportionment.

Year	Percent Not Seeking Reelection		
	Reapportionment Year	Other Years	Difference
1850s	50	44	6
1870s	48	24	24
1880s	31	28	3
1890s	24	19	5
1900s	27	15	12

the next did not necessarily mean that the district had replaced its representative. Instead, party turnover and incumbent turnover were discrete features of an election outcome. The decade of the 1850s, which serves here as the principal benchmark for measuring the subsequent changes in turnover, was a particularly unstable period for political parties. The breakup of the Whigs over slavery early in the decade, the rush of various minor parties to take its place, and the formation of the Republican party guaranteed that the 1850s would be one of the least stable partisan periods in history. Party control of a congressional seat would frequently change simply because the incumbent party had become defunct. As shown below, such instances constituted nearly a quarter of all elections in which the incumbent ran for reelection. Party dissolution does not appear to have been particularly catastrophic for careers, however, as incumbents managed to win two-thirds of these elections. Less frequently, the incumbent would switch parties even though the one he dropped was still functioning. The congressman and not the party was generally the winner in these splits.⁹

		Incumbent Party		
		Won	Lost	No Run
Incumbent Candidate	Won	56%	4%	15%
	Lost	1%	17%	7%

(Percentaging against the total N = 531, all cases in which incumbent ran for reelection.)

By the turn of the century the party system had stabilized. The Democratic and Republican parties now monopolized the loyalties of much of the electorate and virtually all of the officeholders. From 1904 to 1910, 98 percent of all incumbent congressmen who ran for reelection maintained their existing party affiliation. Party turnover meant incumbent turnover as well.

If one examines all instances of party turnover (see column I, Table 1), the decline of party competition during the late nineteenth century appears to have been fully capable of altering careerism within Congress. As we have just noted, however, these figures are deceptive in that the early decades contain

⁹ The case of Edward Morris of Pennsylvania is typical. In 1860 after serving two terms as a Union Party Representative, Morris moved over to the recently formed Republican party. It proved to be a sound maneuver as he doubled his margin of victory over his Democratic opponent. The Union party limped through the election with 13 percent of the vote. Clearly, Morris and not the incumbent party controlled the district. In 1862 with Morris serving as Lincoln's minister in Turkey, the Union Party won back the district.

TABLE 1

The Relationship Between Party Competition and Congressional Turnover,
1820s to 1900s

		Percentage of Elections with Party Turnover in Which the Incumbent Party Ran a Candidate ^a							
I		II		III		IV			
Percent of Elections with Party Turnover		Overall		With Incumbent Congressman Running		With Incumbent Congressman Not Running			
%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N		
1820s	35 (410)	10 (297)		8 (221)		11 (66)			
1850s	47 (890)	27 (639)		22 (376)		30 (237)			
1870s	29 (1087)	22 (996)		18 (631)		28 (348)			
1880s	26 (1287)	20 (1186)		16 (772)		26 (400)			
1890s	22 (1387)	17 (1303)		14 (945)		25 (346)			
1900s	12 (1518)	11 (1492)		9 (1195)		17 (292)			

^aThe N's in columns III and IV together do not equal II because the overall also includes elections where the incumbent candidate ran for the other party.

numerous instances of turnover by default where the incumbent party failed to run a candidate. In the second column only the genuinely competitive elections have been included in the percentaging. From these revised figures the overall level of party competition shows up to be somewhat lower and the decline during the century, while still sizable, is less than suggested by the original percentages. Note also, that from the 1870s through the 1890s, a period of rising congressional tenure, party competition dropped only slightly. Although the downward trend in competition conforms with the prediction of the competition explanation, it best fits the sharp drop in congressional turnover following the 1896 realignment, thus supporting the Schattschneider-Price thesis.¹⁰

Before concluding that the decline in party competition during the last half of the nineteenth century contributed to the rise of congressional careerism, we must first reject the counter hypothesis that party competition was itself a result—not a cause—of careerism. Since an incumbent congressman should be his party's strongest candidate, then we would expect that as more incumbents sought reelection, party turnover naturally should have

¹⁰ David Brady's (1973, p. 153) estimate of the percentage of districts without party turnover for congressional elections during the 1890s is the same as reported in column I, Table 1—78 percent.

declined. According to this argument, incumbent stability produced party stability. To test this we need to control for the effects of congressional incumbency on party turnover. In columns III and IV of Table 1 the congressional elections have been divided according to whether the incumbent ran for reelection. As one would expect, *within each decade* party turnover was less frequent in elections where the incumbent was running.¹¹ This can be largely attributed to the strength of incumbents as candidates, but it may also reflect their foresight in shying away from defeat. More important for assessing the independent effect of competition on changing congressional careers are the *over time* changes in turnover rates in the incumbent and nonincumbent election columns. The trends in columns III and IV reveal that party turnover declined in both types of electoral contests. Incumbents were winning more elections toward the turn of the century, but so were those nonincumbents who were wearing the incumbent party's label. Thus, *the decline of party competition was not an artifact of rising ambitions.*

Throughout the century, regardless of the party system, when a congressman sought reelection, he usually won. After the 1896 realignment and ballot reform there was a reduction in these already low levels of defeat, but the question arises, was the marginal improvement from winning 78 percent of the elections in the 1850s to 91 percent (see column III, Table 1) fifty years later sufficient to induce secular changes in the House's composition?¹² Incumbent turnover from defeat—and as a result, I suspect, from fear of defeat—was relatively low and stable throughout the nineteenth century. Competition may well explain the additional sharp decline in congressional turnover after the turn of the century, when the percentage being defeated more than halved between the 1890s and 1900s, but if we wish to explain the growth of careerism before 1900 we should look elsewhere.¹³

¹¹ It must be remembered that these percentages include only those elections where the incumbent party fielded a candidate. If instead all congressional elections are used as a base, the difference became even more pronounced—especially in the 1820s and 1850s where the incumbent parties frequently disappeared when the incumbent congressman retired or changed parties.

¹² The overall levels of incumbent defeat regardless of whether the incumbent party was running a candidate (as in Table 1) dropped from 25 percent in the 1850s to 10 percent by the 1900s.

¹³ There were important regional variations in party competition which differentially affected careerism in the House. Regional turnover patterns produced noticeable differences in the quality of representation of regions. John Sherman (1895, p. 102) observed, “. . . political leaders from the south were, as a rule, men of greater experience, were longer retained in service of their constituents and held higher public positions than their associates from the north.” Comparing the incumbent and nonincumbent replacement

Ambition

Increasing congressional tenure may have simply reflected the desire of incumbents to return for another term. Incumbent defeat does not appear to have been so prohibitively great, even at mid-century, to have prevented a sizable cadre of careerists from emerging. Clearly other forces had ample opportunity to shape career patterns. The percentages in Table 2 indicate that substantial changes in incumbent turnover during these decades were taking place at the nomination stage. In a near linear fashion the proportion of congressmen seeking reelection increased from 60 percent in the 1850s to 80 percent by the 1900s, a greater reduction in turnover than recorded for competition above.¹⁴

Earlier, party competition was described as having a possible indirect influence on congressmen seeking reelection on the premise that where risk is high, ambition will be low. As competition declined, so the argument goes, a growing number of incumbents sought reelection. In the second and third columns of Table 2 we find that the percent running for reelection increased in congressional districts both where there had and had not been recent party turnover. *Clearly, forces in addition to competition were converting the House into a body of professionals.*

trends, Fiorina, et al. (1975) found that throughout the nineteenth century Southern incumbents returned to the House in greater proportions. They argue that since the "South has not always had a monopoly on safe seats" other explanations such as rotation and ambition must be responsible for the lower turnover. However, the figures below suggest that lower competition may have been largely responsible for that group's greater experience.

Years	South	Nonsouth
1820s	86	80
1850s	88	70
1870s	84	77
1880s	86	78
1890s	91	81
1900s	97	87

¹⁴ Since nomination precedes election, it operates on a larger group of incumbents. Thus, even the same percentage point increases would mean that the nomination stage was having a greater effect on overall levels of turnover.

TABLE 2
 Percentage of Incumbents Running for Reelection,
 1820s–1900s

	Percent Running in Districts ^a					
	Overall Percent Who Ran For Reelection		With Party Turnover ^b		Without Party Turnover	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
1820s	68	(410)	63	(303)	80	(50)
1850s	60	(890)	58	(605)	63	(163)
1870s	64	(1087)	62	(507)	65	(542)
1880s	66	(1287)	63	(578)	68	(704)
1890s	73	(1387)	68	(466)	75	(921)
1900s	80	(1518)	76	(402)	83	(1097)

^aN's in the two columns do not necessarily equal the Total N in the first column because some districts for which only partial decade data are available were eliminated in the partitioning.

^bDistricts which experienced party turnover during the decade.

Neither ambition nor rotation, both of which could have produced trends in Table 2, can be directly measured, and any effort to distinguish their effects will necessarily be somewhat speculative. If the effects of rotation could be eliminated, any residual trend could be more confidently assigned to the growing attractiveness of the office. But how do we control for rotation? Let us assume that in congressional districts where a given political party's caucus nominated an incumbent for a third consecutive term, all future candidates nominated by that party were also exempt from the two-term limit. Such an assumption will obviously be only partially correct. Rotation in many districts was simply a norm, not a rule, and occasionally an incumbent would persuade the nominating caucus to give him another term. Yet, subsequent candidates from these districts provide us with a reasonably good sample of incumbents whose congressional careers were not predetermined by rotation.

With this assumption in mind, we find in Table 3 that in districts where rotation was not an inflexible rule, the percentage of congressmen seeking reelection increased each decade from the 1880s through the 1900s in a

TABLE 3
Congressional Incumbents Seeking Reelection in
Districts without Rotation, 1880s–1900s^a

Years	Percent Seeking Reelection	N
1880s	70	(885)
1890s	79	(1005)
1900s	83	(1301)

^aNonrotation districts are those in which during the preceding and/or current decade a past incumbent ran for three consecutive terms or more. With this operational definition, the decades of the 1820s, 1850s, and 1870s have been omitted since we do not have rotation information for their respective preceding decades.

manner closely resembling the overall renomination trend in Table 2.¹⁵ *Thus, the more frequent appearance of incumbents on the ballot toward the end of the century was not merely an artifact of the disappearance of rotation. Whether rotation constitutes an additional cause of declining turnover needs now to be determined.*

Rotation

Without direct information on caucus-level decisions, the best way to investigate the effects of caucus rotation practices on congressional turnover is to detect its traces on the career patterns of congressmen. Given the widely prevalent two-term rule, if rotation systematically abbreviated congressional careers, a smaller proportion of incumbents should have run for a second reelection to the House than at any other career stage. And as rotation declined, the percentage of incumbents who sought a second reelection should have approached the level of renomination for any other term.

In order to test these predictions, we need to determine the proportion of congressmen who sought reelection at each stage of their career. These data

¹⁵ Note, however, that for each of the three decades the proportion of incumbents seeking reelection is greater than in Table 2 where the percentaging includes districts with rotation. Since the districts in Table 3 necessarily contain instances of an incumbent seeking reelection twice, the inflated percentages are largely an artifact of the assumption.

have been assembled for every congressman who served during the decades under study, and in Figure 2 their careers are summarized with a set of conditional probabilities or percentages.¹⁶ At each reelection “trial” every incumbent whose career reached the designated trial is included in the computation of the probabilities. For example, a congressman who served three terms and then retired is recorded as running in the first and second reelection trials but not in the third.

The trends displayed in Figure 2 support the rotation explanation. The second reelection trial was a significant point of attrition. In the 1870s and 1880s a smaller proportion ran for second reelection than at any other trial. And in the 1850s only at the fifth trial did smaller numbers stand for reelection, and this exception can be almost wholly explained by the massive Southern resignations with secession in 1861. The prediction of declining use of rotation later in the century is also confirmed. From the 1850s where the drop-off rate at the second reelection trial was 14 percentage points greater than at the first, there is a gradual lessening of the difference over the decades. By the 1900s a larger proportion of those who had reached their second reelection trial were running than those who were up for reelection for the first time. Rotation may also have been influencing nominations at the first trial as well, but in this case its effect should have been benign for incumbents. During those decades when attrition at the second trial was so severe the percentage who sought their first reelection was strikingly large. The 1850s, 1870s, and 1880s witnessed more first-term congressmen standing for reelection than the 1890s or early 1900s. Since the two-term limit was tacitly agreed to before the incumbent was nominated, it may have been interpreted as a right to two terms but no more.¹⁷ The evidence supports the argument that rotation served as a significant impediment to career development during the mid-nineteenth century. Its gradual disappearance could only have facilitated the emergence of a professional congressman.

Finally, the career patterns in Figure 2 offer good evidence for the ambition explanation as well. With only the exceptions of the fourth and

¹⁶ Every congressman whose congressional career began or was in progress between the third election of the decade (e.g. 1854) and the first election of the next decade (e.g. 1860) inclusive, was included in this section of the analysis.

¹⁷ Clark (1920, pp. 166–168) describes his strategy of obtaining the nomination in Missouri’s Ninth district. He challenged an incumbent who was up for nomination to the second half of his two-term allotment agreed by the caucus two years earlier. Even though Clark’s chances of winning the nomination at this stage were nil, he established himself as the front runner for the next election when the incumbent would be forced to retire.

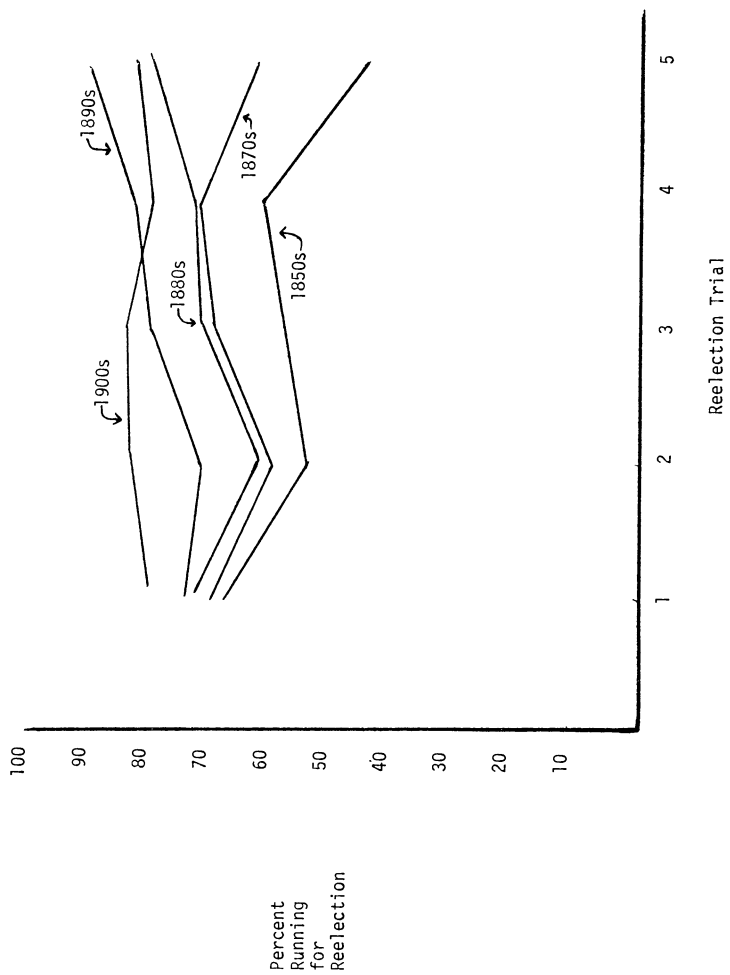


FIGURE 2
Conditional Probabilities of Running for Reelection at Different Stages of a Congressman's Career

fifth trials for the 1890s, each successive decade was attended by a larger proportion of congressmen seeking reelection at each stage of the congressional career. Freshmen and ten-year veterans alike were deciding in greater numbers to try for another term.

Assessing Relative Importance

We have found that competition, ambition, and rotation all appear to have contributed independently to declining congressional turnover. But the evidence gives us little basis for assessing their relative importance, largely because the percentages for each of these variables are based on different sets of congressmen. Competition involves only those incumbents who ran for reelection, while the percentage choosing to seek reelection includes all incumbents. Therefore, a percentage point change in ambition would have a greater impact on the overall turnover rate than the same change in competition. And since rotation affected an even smaller set of congressmen—those who had previously served two terms—a similar change in it would have the least impact on the overall decline in turnover.

Furthermore, the effects of ambition and rotation have not been sufficiently distinguished to allow us to estimate their relative importance on changing career patterns. Specifically, what proportion of congressional careers were ended at the nomination stage by rotation practices and ambition, respectively? Two procedures are available for sorting out these variables with the information provided in Figure 2. We could use an average rate of renomination based on every reelection trial of the decade except the second, with the difference between this average and the second trial attributed to rotation. This method requires that we assume that the probability of seeking reelection is stable across widely dissimilar career stages. While such an assumption appears acceptable in Figure 2 for the 1900s and perhaps the 1870s, it is inappropriate for the other decades. An alternative is simply to subtract the percent running at the second trial from the first. Here we are comparing congressmen at adjacent career stages, although the first reelection trial may be slightly inflated with the reverse effect of rotation described above. With attrition at the first reelection trial as a benchmark, the proportion of *all* congressmen who had their careers ended by rotation at the second reelection trial did not exceed 4 percent for any decade.

Percent of All Careers Ended by Rotation

1850s	4%
1870s	3

1880s	3
1890s	1
1900s	0

These figures are not impressively large, and more importantly, their feeble change over the fifty-year period suggests that rotation is of secondary importance in explaining the increasing congressional tenure.¹⁸

In Table 4 the relative effects of competition, ambition, and rotation on each decade's decline in turnover have been estimated by calculating how many more incumbents would have left the House had the higher attrition rates for the preceding decade remained unchanged. For example, if the overall rate of turnover for the 1850s had been the same, 72 fewer incumbents would have returned to Congress during the 1870s. The higher level of competition in the 1850s (from Table 1) would have eliminated 28 of these incumbents, while higher voluntary turnover (Table 2) and rotation (Figure 2) would have produced an additional 33 and 11 departures, respectively.¹⁹ In this manner the percentages in Table 4 indicate which of the three variables produced the largest, step-wise reduction in congressional turnover from one decade to the next.

¹⁸ The effects of rotation in some locales may, nonetheless, have been tremendous. In Greeley's New York, for example, in the 1850s only a third of the two-term incumbents ran for a second reelection. Over the decades the second trial difference slowly faded—much like the national trend, until by 1900 there was no second trial decline in a renomination.

¹⁹ Note again that the percentages in Table 4 refer to changes in turnover between decades and not to absolute levels of turnover. They were calculated in the following manner:

	Attrition Rate at: Time ₁ - Time ₂	= Net change in rate ×	# of Incumbent Congressmen Affected (Time ₂)	= # of Congressmen who would have been eliminated	Percent (Entries in Table 4)
Rotation				a	a ÷ d
Ambition				b	b ÷ d
Competition				c	c ÷ d
			Total # Eliminated =	d	

Since the three contributors to turnover occur sequentially, the number of congressmen affected (column 4) will vary. Entries a, b, and c provide the number of additional congressmen who would have left the House at Time₂ had the previous decade's attrition rate remained unchanged.

TABLE 4

The Relative Direct Effects of Competition, Ambition, and Rotation on Declining Congressional Turnover

Change From:	Overall Percentage Point Decrease in Turnover	Proportion of Change in Turnover Attributable to:			
		Competition	Ambition	Rotation	
1850s to 1870s	7	39%	46%	15%	100%
1870s to 1880s	2	22	70	8	100
1880s to 1890s	8	24	54	22	100
1890s to 1900s	11	45	48	8	101

Throughout the period, ambition appears as the primary source of declining turnover. About half of each decade's decline in turnover can be attributed to the increasing tendency of incumbents to seek reelection. Changing competitiveness of congressional elections made a significant but clearly weaker contribution. Its increased importance at the turn of the century fits the prediction of the Schattschneider-Price thesis, but even during this period of rapidly increasing tenure "the system of 1896" was not the exclusive determinant of turnover. The gradual disappearance of rotation practices, as we suspected, only marginally lengthened careers. These figures understate rotation's significance for the growth of careerism, however, in that it operated exclusively upon those second-term incumbents who were at the threshold of a career.

Summary and Speculation

Growing membership stability within the House during the late nineteenth century was produced by several forces. Competition contributed to turnover directly through defeat (Table 1) and indirectly by discouraging incumbents from seeking reelection (Table 2). As competition declined, so did turnover. Local rotation practices produced only marginal reductions in the overall levels of House turnover (Table 4). Competition and rotation were largely beyond the congressman's control; they were simply unfortunate conditions with which he had to contend. Structural changes of the electoral system—such as the 1896 realignment, ballot reform, and the direct primary—were required to reduce these impediments to widespread congressional careerism.

The findings suggest, however, that the primary source of growing membership stability can be found in the men who ran for office. Controlling for

the effects of competition (Table 2) and rotation (Table 3 and Figure 2), the proportion of congressmen who sought reelection increased each decade. A comprehensive explanation of why congressmen chose to return for another term in increasing numbers is beyond the scope and data of this paper, but at least a couple of reasons seem likely.

Just as the Middle Ages is coming to life to historians, historians have reformed their image of late nineteenth century America. No longer the idle "Gilded Age," it is now viewed as a period of intensive institutional development or, as Wiebe (1967, pp. 137-158) has termed it, a "Search for Order." Business, educational, voluntary, and governmental organizations were taking their modern form. Occupational roles became more specialized, new professions emerged, and old ones grew more "bounded" with the formation of professional societies. During this period the job of congressman became more demanding, as evidenced by longer sessions and common complaints of heavy daily schedules. The increasingly incompatible demands of private careers at home and House service forced many congressmen to decide whether to stay in public life or stay out. David Rothman (1966) in his study of the Senate's development amply documents this dilemma. Take, for example, the advice of Senator J. Scott Harrison to his son Benjamin, the future Senator and President:

The path of the politician is at best a rugged one, full of thorns, and but a few roses, and before treading it, a man should accumulate enough of this world's goods to fall back upon. . . . Were I in your place I would not enter the arena of politics until my private fortune would justify taking a final leave of my profession (Rothman, 1966, p. 49).

At the same time that public life was becoming less compatible with private careers, the typical political career itself was undergoing a fundamental change. James Young (1966) noticed that many of his transient congressmen during the Jeffersonian era remained in politics after congressional service yet voluntarily opted for some "lower" office. A typical career sequence early in the nineteenth century would be local office, state house, U.S. house, and back to the state house. If the individual were lucky, somewhere along the line a government sinecure, or a judgeship, would be available. Or if he climbed the career ladder—and the top rungs appear to have formed early—he would manage to win a gubernatorial or senatorial seat. With the rise of national government, a status hierarchy of offices formed which directed political ambitions toward Washington.

With hierarchy came stability. No longer was every politician eligible for and equally likely to seek every other office. The musical chairs of the early nineteenth century were replaced by a tacit consensus among politicians

about appropriate career development. In prescribing and limiting options for mobility for officeholders throughout the system, the hierarchy may well have induced greater membership stability among all offices, Congress included. As a result congressional careers became "static" (Schlesinger, 1966, pp. 9–10). To the degree that the growth of congressional careerism was based on the increasingly regulated play of political ambition, it may have reflected the larger processes of professionalization of public life and the emergence of orderly political careers.

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