The behavior of congressional tenure over time: 1953–1991*

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Abstract. This paper studies the behavior of average length of tenure for cohorts of U.S. representatives who entered office from 1953–1989. Using a new methodology, it addresses the following questions. How much longer do representatives stay in office now compared to, say, twenty years ago? If an increase in tenure has occurred, when did it begin? Are reelection outcomes or voluntary departures the primary determinants of changes in congressional tenure over time? The results of this study are then applied to a number of hypotheses concerning possible causes of longer congressional stays.

1. Introduction

A widely voiced concern in the popular media focuses on the length of time congressmen stay in office. The recent attention to ethics problems and congressional pay have raised questions in the popular press about whether electorally safe congressmen are accountable for their actions. Perceived abuses of power have led to calls for limits on how long congressmen stay in office. Indeed, bills have been introduced in both chambers of Congress calling for restrictions on the number of terms representatives and senators should be allowed to stay in office.

Despite this concern, this subject has received little attention in the academic literature. While a general perception exists that the tenures of U.S. representatives have increased in recent years, no study, to our knowledge, has documented or analyzed this trend. Reelection rates are currently very high, but they are not without precedent. For example, in the election years 1968–1972, reelection rates were 96.8, 94.5, and 93.6% respectively. They have been over 90% for fifteen of the last nineteen elections. Furthermore,
other factors besides reelection rates, primarily the rate of voluntary departures, contribute to the length of representatives' stays. The relationship between changes in these rates and changes in length of stay has not been well defined.

In our opinion, a serious study of representatives' stays in office must begin by answering a number of basic questions. How much longer do House members stay in office now compared to, say, twenty years ago? If an increase in length of stays has occurred, when did it begin? Are reelection outcomes or voluntary departures the primary determinants of changes in House tenure over time? The task of the present paper is to address these questions.

It turns out that a major hurdle in the analysis of congressional tenure concerns methodology. Since many congressmen stay in office for very long periods of time, the full picture of the completed stays of congressmen may not be available until thirty or even forty years after a particular cohort of congressmen enters office. Where there is interest in more recent cohorts, previous studies have resorted to proxies for congressional tenure, such as reelection rates and the average attained tenure of all congressmen serving in a given Congress (commonly called "Mean Term"). As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Reed and Schansberg, 1990a), both measures are inappropriate for measuring congressional tenure.

In contrast, this study uses a new methodology for studying the behavior of tenure in the House of Representatives. We modify techniques found in the labor literature on unemployment durations to estimate the completed spells of currently serving representatives. We then combine these estimates with the records of those congressmen who have already left office in order to derive the following conclusions concerning representatives' tenure.

First, we demonstrate that House tenures have increased substantially over time: The mean completed tenures of representatives who entered office after 1975 are estimated to be from 16 to 44% larger than those who entered office between 1953 and 1975. Actual percentage increases depend upon political party (Democrats have experienced greater increases than Republicans) and the assumptions one uses in computing the completed tenures of currently serving representatives.

Second, this increase has not occurred gradually over time. From 1953 to 1975, no secular trend in House tenures is evident. After 1975, a notable increase is identified. Further, as Figure 1 shows, the traditional measure of average stay in the House, "Mean Term," misrepresents both the size and the trend of the increase in representatives' tenures. The popularity of the latter term as a proxy for congressional tenures is one reason why previous studies have failed to detect this change.

Third, our analysis indicates that the longer House tenures are due to higher reelection rates in the first four terms of a representative's career, not volun-