



# Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, 1<sup>st</sup> - 111<sup>th</sup> Congresses

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## Summary

The average tenure of Members of the Senate and House of Representatives at the beginning of each Congress has varied substantially since 1789. The purpose of this report is to provide a Congress-by-Congress summary of the average years of service for Senators and Representatives for the First through the 111<sup>th</sup> Congresses. The information for each Congress reflects only the Members entitled to be seated at the beginning of that Congress.

The report contains a brief summary of some of the explanations by political scientists and others for the various changes in the average years of service. The information should be read with the understanding that the length of congressional careers has also depended on the number of congressional retirements as well as the success rates for those incumbents who have sought reelection. For information on the number of freshmen elected to Congress, refer to CRS Report R41283, *First-Term Members of the House of Representatives and Senate, 64th – 111th Congresses*, by Jennifer E. Manning and R. Eric Petersen.

The average years of service for Members of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, as of January 3, 2009, when the Congress convened was 10.1 years for the House and 12.3 years for the Senate.

This report will be updated after the commencement of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress.

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## Introduction

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

Most lawmakers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be characterized as “citizen legislators,” holding full-time non-political employment and serving in Congress on a part-time basis for a short number of years. Political scientist H. Douglas Price wrote that “the distinguished Senators of the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress set the early career pattern for that chamber: They fled the Capitol ... almost as fast as humanly possible.... Career data on the early Senate is a morass of resignations, short-term appointees, elective replacements.... There are no notable careers in terms of service.”<sup>2</sup> According to Price, the lack of incentives for Members to retain their seats explains the high turnover in those early years of the House. Power was fluid in the House. The Speaker controlled committee appointments; there was frequent change in party control, and no seniority influence.<sup>3</sup> Price also wrote that the Congress elected in 1900 was the first in American history in which new Members accounted for less than 30% of the membership.<sup>4</sup>

After the 1880s, circumstances changed and the rise of careerism in Congress began in the period from 1890-1910.<sup>5</sup> The strengthening of the party system, the emergence of one-party states and districts following the Civil War, and institutional changes in Congress made re-election easier. The emergence of national problems raised a legislative career to a new level of importance; and the demonstration by Congress, after Lincoln’s death, that it intended to play a more assertive role in government contributed to many Members’ desire to remain in Congress.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, legislative careers became professionalized, and the concept of the “citizen legislator” became a thing of the past.<sup>7</sup>

Some political scientists and others have attributed the demise of the “citizen legislator” and the stabilization of congressional membership to (1) the importance of the seniority system; (2) increased opportunities for junior Members; (3) the ease of traveling between Washington, DC, and home states and districts; (4) senior Members’ involvement and success in promoting

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

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

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> David Brady, Kara Buckley, and Douglas Rivers (Stanford University), “The Roots of Careerism in the House of Representatives,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, November 1999, p. 490.

<sup>6</sup> Ripley, *Congress: Process and Policy*, p. 51; and Price, “Congress and the Evolution of Legislative ‘Professionalism,’” p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Baker, “‘Citizen Legislators’ Would Be Better,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 1983, p. 21; and Saul Pett, “Baker Seeks to Change Face of Congress,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 1983, pp. 2, 15.

legislative agendas; and (5) the advantages of incumbency that allow Members to generate publicity, serve constituents, and receive support in organizing their offices and forming agendas that help them be effective legislators.<sup>8</sup>

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

## Analysis of Data

**Table 1** shows, by chamber and by Congress, the average years of service at the beginning of each Congress. **Figure 1** graphically plots the data from the First to 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. The freshmen Members of each house are counted as having no service (zero years). Changes in membership during a Congress are not taken into account.

### House of Representatives

Between the Second and 12<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1791-1813), the average years of service for a Member of the House ranged from a low of 1.0 years to a high of 3.7 years. From the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress to the 47<sup>th</sup> Congress (1813-1883), the average service fluctuated from a low of 1.4 years in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1853-1855) to a high of 3.3 years in the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress (1827-1829). From the 48<sup>th</sup> through the 69<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1883-1927), the average was between 2.4 years and 5.8 years. In the 70<sup>th</sup> through the 72<sup>nd</sup> Congresses (1927-1933) during the Great Depression, the average years of service rose to an all-time high, to that point, of around seven years of service.

One of the highest levels of turnover in the 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred in the Franklin D. Roosevelt landslide election of 1932, and in succeeding congressional election cycles as Republicans began to regain seats lost in 1932. In the 73<sup>rd</sup> through the 76<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1933-1941), the average length of House service fell below six years before trending upward (with some fluctuations) over the next 65 years.

From the 84<sup>th</sup> through the 101<sup>st</sup> Congresses (1955-1991), service ranged from then record highs of eight to more than nine years, with the exception of the 96<sup>th</sup> through the 98<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1979-1985), when service was somewhat more than seven years. In the 102<sup>nd</sup> Congress (1991-1993), the average House service reached an all-time high of 10.2 years. The average length of service then fluctuated between eight and nine years from the 103<sup>rd</sup> to the 109<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1993-2005), except for the 104<sup>th</sup> and 105<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1995-1999), when the change in party control saw the average service decline to 7.7 years. Since the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, the average years of service has been greater than 10 years.

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

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

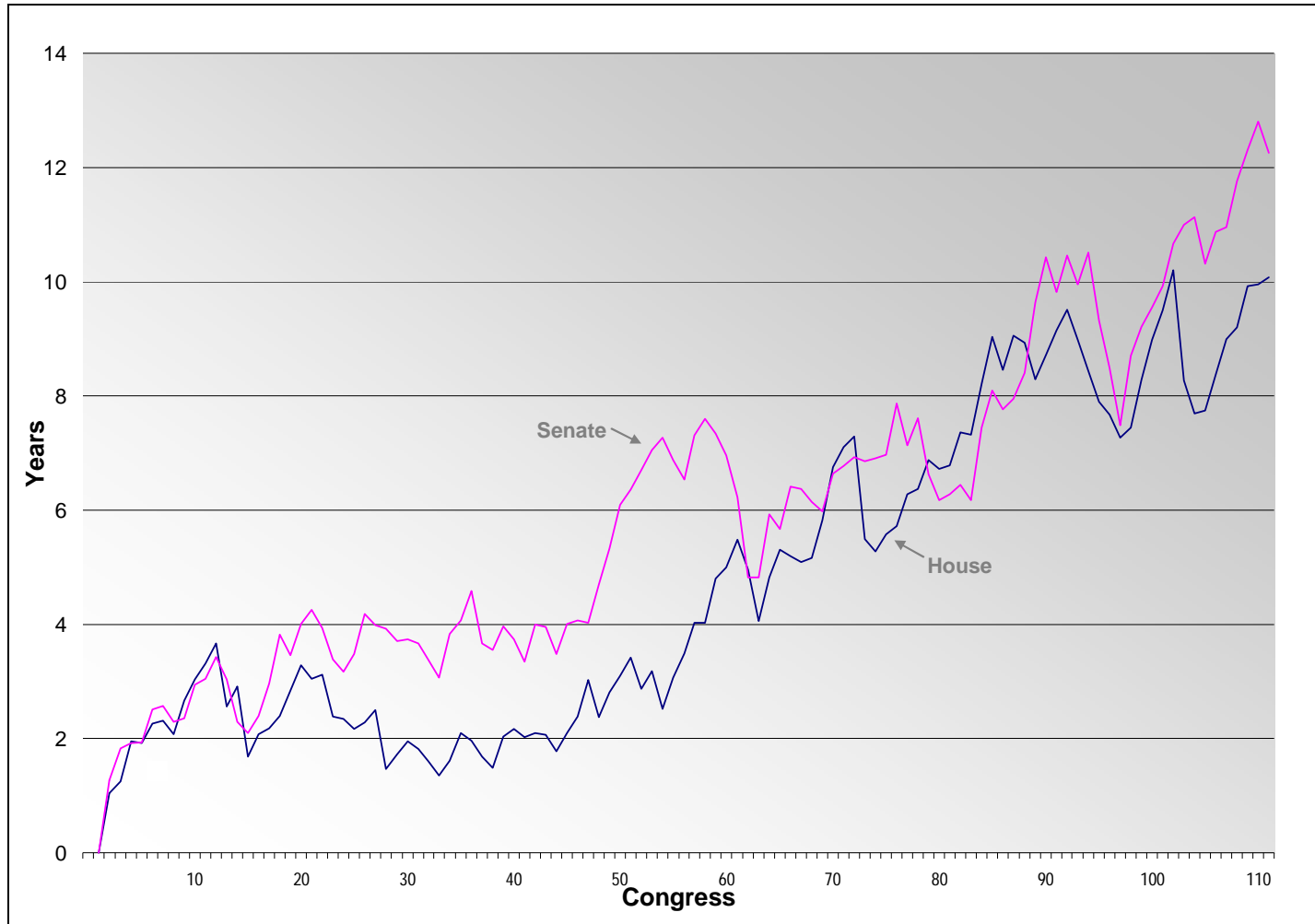
## Senate

Between the Second and 21<sup>st</sup> Congresses (1791-1831), the average years of Senate service ranged from a low of 1.3 years (Second Congress) to a high of 4.3 years (21<sup>st</sup> Congress). From the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress through the 48<sup>th</sup> Congress (1831-1885), the years of Senate service averaged over three and under five. With the exception of the 62<sup>nd</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Congresses (1911-1915), when the average length of Senate service was about five years, the years of service from the 49<sup>th</sup> through the 75<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1885-1939) averaged between six and seven and one-half years, an indication that many Senators were beginning to serve more than one term. Note that the direct election of Senators began with the elections to the 63<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1913-1915).

From the 76<sup>th</sup> through the 79<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1939-1947), Senate service was at a then all-time high of eight years and has never fallen to five years again. With the change in party control at the beginning of the 80<sup>th</sup> Congress (1947-1949), however, it did fall to 6.2 years, before trending upward from the 84<sup>th</sup> through the 94<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1949-1977). Average Senate service passed the 10-year mark in the 90<sup>th</sup> Congress (1967-1969), as well as the 92<sup>nd</sup> through 94<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1971-1977).

From the 95<sup>th</sup> through the 100<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1977-1989), Senate service fluctuated between a high of 9.6 years in the 100<sup>th</sup> Congress (1997-1989) and a low of 7.5 years in the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress (1981-1983), then remained between 9.9 and 11.8 years from the 101<sup>st</sup> through the 108<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1989-2005). Average Senate service reached record highs in the 108<sup>th</sup>, 109<sup>th</sup>, and 110<sup>th</sup> Congresses (2003-2009) with 11.8 years, 12.3 years, and 12.8 years of service, respectively.

**Figure I. Average Years of Service for Senators and Representatives,  
by Chamber and Congress, First - 111<sup>th</sup> Congresses**



Source: CRS analysis of ICPSR and proprietary data.

**Table 1. Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, First – 111<sup>th</sup> Congresses**

<b>Congress and Years</b>	<b>House</b>	<b>Senate</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> , 1789-1791	0.0	0.0
2 <sup>nd</sup> , 1791-1793	1.0	1.3
3 <sup>rd</sup> , 1793-1795	1.2	1.8
4 <sup>th</sup> , 1795-1797	2.0	1.9
5 <sup>th</sup> , 1797-1799	1.9	1.9
6 <sup>th</sup> , 1799-1801	2.3	2.5
7 <sup>th</sup> , 1801-1803	2.3	2.6
8 <sup>th</sup> , 1803-1805	2.1	2.3
9 <sup>th</sup> , 1805-1807	2.7	2.4
10 <sup>th</sup> , 1807-1809	3.0	2.9
11 <sup>th</sup> , 1809-1811	3.3	3.0
12 <sup>th</sup> , 1811-1813	3.7	3.4
13 <sup>th</sup> , 1813-1815	2.6	3.0
14 <sup>th</sup> , 1815-1817	2.9	2.3
15 <sup>th</sup> , 1817-1819	1.7	2.1
16 <sup>th</sup> , 1819-1821	2.1	2.4
17 <sup>th</sup> , 1821-1823	2.2	3.0
18 <sup>th</sup> , 1823-1825	2.4	3.8
19 <sup>th</sup> , 1825-1827	2.8	3.5
20 <sup>th</sup> , 1827-1829	3.3	4.0
21 <sup>st</sup> , 1829-1831	3.1	4.3
22 <sup>nd</sup> , 1831-1833	3.1	3.9
23 <sup>rd</sup> , 1833-1835	2.4	3.4
24 <sup>th</sup> , 1835-1837	2.3	3.2
25 <sup>th</sup> , 1837-1839	2.2	3.5
26 <sup>th</sup> , 1839-1841	2.3	4.2
27 <sup>th</sup> , 1841-1843	2.5	4.0
28 <sup>th</sup> , 1843-1845	1.5	3.9
29 <sup>th</sup> , 1845-1847	1.7	3.7
30 <sup>th</sup> , 1847-1849	2.0	3.7
31 <sup>st</sup> , 1849-1851	1.8	3.7
32 <sup>nd</sup> , 1851-1853	1.6	3.4
33 <sup>rd</sup> , 1853-1855	1.4	3.1
34 <sup>th</sup> , 1855-1857	1.6	3.8
35 <sup>th</sup> , 1857-1859	2.1	4.1



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*Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives*

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<b>Congress and Years</b>	<b>House</b>	<b>Senate</b>
36 <sup>th</sup> , 1859-1861	2.0	4.6
37 <sup>th</sup> , 1861-1863	1.7	3.7
38 <sup>th</sup> , 1863-1865	1.5	3.6
39 <sup>th</sup> , 1865-1867	2.0	4.0
40 <sup>th</sup> , 1867-1869	2.2	3.7
41 <sup>st</sup> , 1869-1871	2.0	3.3
42 <sup>nd</sup> , 1871-1873	2.1	4.0
43 <sup>rd</sup> , 1873-1875	2.1	4.0
44 <sup>th</sup> , 1875-1877	1.8	3.5
45 <sup>th</sup> , 1877-1879	2.1	4.0
46 <sup>th</sup> , 1879-1881	2.4	4.1
47 <sup>th</sup> , 1881-1883	3.0	4.0
48 <sup>th</sup> , 1883-1885	2.4	4.7
49 <sup>th</sup> , 1885-1887	2.8	5.3
50 <sup>th</sup> , 1887-1889	3.1	6.1
51 <sup>st</sup> , 1889-1891	3.4	6.4
52 <sup>nd</sup> , 1891-1893	2.9	6.7
53 <sup>rd</sup> , 1893-1895	3.2	7.1
54 <sup>th</sup> , 1895-1897	2.5	7.3
55 <sup>th</sup> , 1897-1899	3.1	6.9
56 <sup>th</sup> , 1899-1901	3.5	6.5
57 <sup>th</sup> , 1901-1903	4.0	7.3
58 <sup>th</sup> , 1903-1905	4.0	7.6
59 <sup>th</sup> , 1905-1907	4.8	7.3
60 <sup>th</sup> , 1907-1909	5.0	7.0
61 <sup>st</sup> , 1909-1911	5.5	6.2
62 <sup>nd</sup> , 1911-1913	5.0	4.8
63 <sup>rd</sup> , 1913-1915	4.1	4.8
64 <sup>th</sup> , 1915-1917	4.8	5.9
65 <sup>th</sup> , 1917-1919	5.3	5.7
66 <sup>th</sup> , 1919-1921	5.2	6.4
67 <sup>th</sup> , 1921-1923	5.1	6.4
68 <sup>th</sup> , 1923-1925	5.2	6.1
69 <sup>th</sup> , 1925-1927	5.8	6.0
70 <sup>th</sup> , 1927-1929	6.8	6.6
71 <sup>st</sup> , 1929-1931	7.1	6.8
72 <sup>nd</sup> , 1931-1933	7.3	6.9

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*Average Years of Service for Members of the Senate and House of Representatives*

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<b>Congress and Years</b>	<b>House</b>	<b>Senate</b>
73 <sup>rd</sup> , 1933-1935	5.5	6.9
74 <sup>th</sup> , 1935-1937	5.3	6.9
75 <sup>th</sup> , 1937-1939	5.6	7.0
76 <sup>th</sup> , 1939-1941	5.7	7.9
77 <sup>th</sup> , 1941-1943	6.3	7.1
78 <sup>th</sup> , 1943-1945	6.4	7.6
79 <sup>th</sup> , 1945-1947	6.9	6.6
80 <sup>th</sup> , 1947-1949	6.7	6.2
81 <sup>st</sup> , 1949-1951	6.8	6.3
82 <sup>nd</sup> , 1951-1953	7.4	6.5
83 <sup>rd</sup> , 1953-1955	7.3	6.2
84 <sup>th</sup> , 1955-1957	8.2	7.4
85 <sup>th</sup> , 1957-1959	9.0	8.1
86 <sup>th</sup> , 1959-1961	8.5	7.8
87 <sup>th</sup> , 1961-1963	9.1	8.0
88 <sup>th</sup> , 1963-1965	8.9	8.4
89 <sup>th</sup> , 1965-1967	8.3	9.6
90 <sup>th</sup> , 1967-1969	8.7	10.4
91 <sup>st</sup> , 1969-1971	9.2	9.8
92 <sup>nd</sup> , 1971-1973	9.5	10.5
93 <sup>rd</sup> , 1973-1975	9.0	10.0
94 <sup>th</sup> , 1975-1977	8.4	10.5
95 <sup>th</sup> , 1977-1979	7.9	9.3
96 <sup>th</sup> , 1979-1981	7.7	8.5
97 <sup>th</sup> , 1981-1983	7.3	7.5
98 <sup>th</sup> , 1983-1985	7.4	8.7
99 <sup>th</sup> , 1985-1987	8.3	9.2
100 <sup>th</sup> , 1987-1989	9.0	9.6
101 <sup>st</sup> , 1989-1991	9.5	9.9
102 <sup>nd</sup> , 1991-1993	10.2	10.7
103 <sup>rd</sup> , 1993-1995	8.3	11.0
104 <sup>th</sup> , 1995-1997	7.7	11.1
105 <sup>th</sup> , 1997-1999	7.7	10.3
106 <sup>th</sup> , 1999-2001	8.4	10.9
107 <sup>th</sup> , 2001-2003	9.0	11.0
108 <sup>th</sup> , 2003-2005	9.2	11.8
109 <sup>th</sup> , 2005-2007	10.0	12.3

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<b>Congress and Years</b>	<b>House</b>	<b>Senate</b>
110 <sup>th</sup> , 2007-2009	10.0	12.8
111 <sup>th</sup> , 2009-2011	10.1	12.3

**Sources:** From the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 101<sup>st</sup> Congresses (1789-1991), the source was the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor, MI (ICPSR). For the 102<sup>nd</sup> through 111<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1991-2011), the years were calculated by CRS.

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