

# EXPLAINING CONGRESSIONAL STAFF MEMBERS' DECISIONS TO LEAVE THE HILL

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*The high turnover of congressional staff members can have a negative effect on the functioning of Congress as an institution. Though junior staff turnover is not considered a significant concern, the high turnover of senior staff members is problematic. Using data from a survey of staff members located in the Washington personal offices of House of Representatives members, this article investigates what factors influence the likelihood to leave congressional employment. Specifically, I explore how solidary, purposive, and material work incentives influence staff members' plans to exit. The results of two different models—one for junior and mid-level staff members and one for executive staff members—indicate that purposive incentives, and material incentives that accrue for future employment opportunities, carry the most weight across both models. Current salary has a significant effect on executive staff members, but not on their lower-level counterparts. Following this analysis, I propose actions that congressional offices might take to retain staff.*

The people who serve in Congress play a critical role in our democratic process. Understanding why these individuals come to Congress, and why they leave, helps us understand their motivations as well as the functioning of the institution itself. Considerable research has explored why people run for Congress (e.g., Canon 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; Kazee 1980), as well as why representatives voluntarily leave office (e.g., Hall and van Houweling 1995; Hibbing 1982). However, elected officeholders are only one of the groups of people who serve in Congress, albeit the most prominent one. Thousands of staff members work in congressional offices, serving both in Washington and in district offices, in committee and personal offices. Though less understood than their elected employers, they have considerable policy impact, and senior staff members in particular serve as powerful extensions of their members (DeGregorio 1995; DeGregorio and

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Snider 1995; Fox and Hammond 1977; Hammond 1996; Malbin 1980; Patterson 1970; Price 1971). Some are vested with the authority to make significant policy decisions, and accountability to the representative who employs them can be diffuse (Romzek 2000).

Despite the importance of congressional staff members, we know little about them. Drawing on interviews with 40 professional-level staff members working in House or Senate in personal, committee, or leadership offices, Romzek and Utter (1996) developed a preliminary profile of congressional staff work experiences and career dynamics. They concluded by proffering a set of research questions for future work on congressional staff. One line of research focuses on career commitment and motivation. “[D]o career stage, orientation, and job location influence commitment? We expect nearly all staffers to report a primary commitment to their member-employer. But exploratory interviews suggest there are some individuals who have a higher commitment to partisan and policy agendas than to individual members. Are these commitment differences related to the different career orientations of personal loyalty, policy, partisanship, and geography?” (1996, 438).

The research on the career motivations and decision making of federal civil servants is considerable.<sup>1</sup> Research in this vein has not focused on congressional staff members. Studies focusing on congressional staff members themselves—their attitudes and career motivations—have been very limited. Thus, we have few tools to understand why they hold their jobs for such short periods. In 2002, average tenure for a staff member in a particular position within a congressional office was only 3.3 years, and the average tenure in a particular congressional office was only a bit longer, at 4.0 years. The average tenure in Congress—all consecutively held jobs within the institution—was only 5.5 years (Congressional Management Foundation [CMF] 2003). Even among chiefs of staff, the average tenure in the position was only 4.5 years, and the average tenure in Congress was only 10.7 years. As staff turnover is high—Mann and Ornstein (1992, 69) called it “alarmingly high”—and given the importance of staff as extensions of members of Congress, it is worth investigating why. High turnover can lead to a lack of both experienced staff members and institutional memory. It can also be a sign of other larger personnel problems or institutional shortcomings. Although Romzek and Utter (1996) note that the turnover has not been a major concern of the average member of Congress—who does not see a direct connection between staff longevity and his or her own career goals—they also explain that the loss of experienced senior staff is problematic for the institution.

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of Congress by examining how work motivation and job satisfaction influence a congressional staff member’s expectation that he or she will leave congressional employment. First, I discuss the motivations of congressional staff. In particular, I focus on incentive theory (Clark and Wilson 1961; Wilson 1995), which posits that organizational actors can be motivated by solidary, purposive, or material incentives. Next, I discuss the staffing of congressional offices and what we know—and do not know—about congressional employees’ motivations and job satisfaction. How might each type

of job motivation influence a staff member's likelihood to leave the Hill? I then use a 2003 survey of congressional staff members—specifically, those working in the Washington, DC personal offices of members of the House of Representatives—to attempt to answer this question. I conclude by assessing the results and discussing the implications of these findings for congressional office staffing policy.

## CONGRESSIONAL STAFF MOTIVATIONS AND THE DESIRE TO LEAVE THE HILL

What motivates the people who work in Congress? Perry and Wise (1990) note that while some motives are utilitarian and influence many types of employees, some motives “appear to be primarily or exclusively related with public service” (369). Staff members are not drawn by high salaries or regular hours, but the substance of the job itself. Romzek and Utter find that “the fundamental motivation of congressional staffers is to be part of a process that affords opportunities to influence public policy” (1996, 422). At the same time, other research indicates that young congressional aides are ambitious with regard to their own careers (e.g., Malbin 1980). Salisbury and Shepsle (1981) note, “The most common initial motivation for work on the Hill possesses all the characteristics of an investment; it is a stepping stone from which to launch a career elsewhere” (383). Fox and Hammond (1977) and Henschen and Sidlow (1986) investigate staff members who moved between different organizations to pursue their goals related to political outcomes and personal benefits. These orientations indicate that there is at least some self-interest among Hill staffers, and that they may balance multiple work motivations.

Several scholars developed theories that place motivations into quite similar categories. Clark and Wilson (1961) argued that people are motivated by a desire for one of three types of benefits. There are *material benefits*, which are monetary or other tangible personal benefits; *purposive benefits*, or benefits that result from specific policies; and *solidary benefits*, or benefits resulting from the process of political participation. Wilson (1995) later split the motivation for solidary benefits into two categories. He classified benefits that result from social interactions but accrue to an individual, such as honor and prestige, as specific solidary benefits. He classified benefits that result from enjoying the social interactions of political work as collective solidary benefits. Robert Salisbury (1969) and Terry Moe (1981) have used similar frameworks to classify motivations. Salisbury argues that people might seek material benefits, purposive benefits, or expressive benefits from their associations; the latter type of benefit results from the enjoyment of expressing one's political views, and is akin to Clark and Wilson's (1961) solidary benefits. Moe explains organizational involvement, arguing that motivations to participate may be social, political, or economic.

While the existing literature does not describe congressional staff motivations using these terms, the categorization of solidary, purposive, and material benefits does seem well suited to congressional staff motivations. Larger policy goals and

commitment to the public good are purposive motivations. Congress is a workplace that provides considerable room for solidary benefits as well; there can be strong personal ties to one's elected representative, as well as a larger collective benefits that result from being a part of a political team. The team might be the congressional office, or it might be the staffer's party; Fox and Hammond (1977) found that staff members had strong party preferences, and Romzek and Utter (1996) expect that in some cases commitment to party will trump commitment to one's employer. Material benefits would include typical rewards such as salary, as well as benefits that might materialize down the road, such as future opportunities for advancement. Some benefits might be considered to fall into multiple categories. For example, Salisbury and Shepsle (1981) found that staff careers are tied quite closely with their employing member of Congress. Their examination of staff rosters indicated that when members of Congress leave office, staffers tend to depart as well, and House members who move to the Senate tended to take their staffs with them. These ties clearly reflect solidary benefits, but if one's member of Congress is well placed or particularly powerful, there might also be long-term material benefits from this relationship.

What might lead congressional staff members to leave the Hill? Hirschman's (1970) seminal work, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, makes clear that people's attitudes and motivations influence their likelihood to leave. This means that solidary, purposive, and material organizational incentives could influence congressional staff exit. Furthermore, congressional staffing structures mean that moving up in Congress can be increasingly difficult. The typical distribution of staff members resembles not a pyramid but a diamond, with more staff at the middle levels than at the top or bottom. A junior staff member might have a good chance at internal promotion to a mid-level position even if office turnover is relatively low; staff assistants often get promoted to legislative correspondent or legislative assistant after they have served in an office successfully and when a position becomes available. Progressing further is more challenging, since there are multiple legislative assistants who might want to move up. Most offices have multiple mid-level legislative assistants, though only one legislative director and one chief of staff. As staff members want to advance their positions, only some will be able to move to the senior ranks. Committee staff positions, which typically pay better than personal office positions, are another option for upwardly mobile staff members, but they are scarcer than personal office positions. Senate personal and committee offices are larger than House offices (and often pay a bit better) but the staffing distribution is similar, and presents the same challenges to advancing within Congress. This bottleneck in staff progression could lead talented staff members to seek work elsewhere.

Other factors that might lead staff members to leave the Hill include job qualities that matter everywhere, but that can be particularly challenging in Congress: irregular work hours particularly when the House is in session; a stressful environment where mistakes can receive newspaper coverage; and representatives who can be

poor managers and difficult personalities to boot. Work conditions have been catalogued in staff memoirs (e.g., Kessler 1997; Lackley 1992) and newspapers such as Capitol Hill's *Roll Call* and *The Hill* (e.g., Crossey 1999; Eilperin 1996), and by the Congressional Management Foundation (1995). Furthermore, staff salaries are lower than both those in the federal civil service and Washington's private sector (CMF 1995; 2003). Even a prestigious office placement might not make up for a low salary over time (Fox and Hammond 1977).

In sum, the existing scholarship provides us with some insight regarding possible reasons for congressional staff turnover, but we are short on solid answers on how much these factors might matter, and to what sort of staffer. Is a desire for more money what pulls staff members away from Congress? Does a commitment to public policy bind a staff member more closely? Does the social camaraderie of the Hill play a role? Does irritation with long work hours motivate staff members to leave? And finally, do these factors affect junior and senior staff members differently?

### THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PERSONAL STAFF STUDY

To investigate how these types of work benefits might influence congressional staff members' decisions to leave congressional employment, I use data from a 2003 survey to investigate the largest set of staff members: those working in the Washington, DC personal offices of members of the House of Representatives. Staff members working in committee offices and district offices are of course also very significant actors, but their office structures are quite different, and thus I leave the examination of those staff members to another study. Large-n surveys of all levels of personal office staff members are very uncommon,<sup>2</sup> and thus this study can provide particular insights into the career patterns and motivations of this set of staff members.

The survey was distributed via the Internet; Internet surveys of this size have the advantage of having lower marginal costs than telephone or mail surveys (Couper 2000), and have similar accuracy rates (Berrens et al. 2003). Information about the survey was sent to each personal office chief of staff by mail; e-mail invitations were then sent to every Washington personal office staff member listed in the 2003 *Congressional Yellow Book*. Inoperable e-mail addresses due to staff turnover as well as some incorrect e-mail addresses resulted in undelivered e-mail messages; not more than 2,200 staff members received e-mail invitations to complete the survey. Since incentives lead to increased response rates (Dillman 2000), survey participants could enter a raffle for Harry and David gift baskets and Amazon.com gift cards.

Some questions were included in each of the three waves of the survey; due to constraints of survey length, others were included in only one wave. Demographic characteristics of respondents were consistent across survey waves. Presuming 2,200 recipients, the survey yielded a 29% response rate, a response rate not atypical for elite surveys today (Maestas, Neeley, and Richardson 2003; Sheehan 2001), and

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristic	House personal office staff, as calculated by the CMA	Survey Respondents
Average age in years	31 (in Washington)	29
Percent white	87.8 (in Washington)	86.7
Percent male	51.0 (in Washington)	46.1
Percent with bachelor's degree	93.4 (in Washington)	94.8
Percent married	38.7 (overall)	34.2
Percent with children	24.3 (overall)	18.6

similar to previous surveys of congressional staff members (i.e., Fox and Hammond 1977), but less than ideal. Under these circumstances, it is particularly important to examine how well the survey sample matches the broader population. (It is also useful to note that the surveys reached a very large proportion—slightly more than 60%—of the target population.) On the whole, the respondents are quite representative of the larger House personal staff population on Capitol Hill.

Table 1 presents demographic information about the respondents, and compares this with demographic information drawn from a 2002 Congressional Management Foundation study of House offices (CMF 2003).<sup>3</sup> Overall, the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents reflect quite closely those of the broader congressional staff population in Washington. My respondents are slightly younger and slightly better educated than personal office staffers in Washington as a whole; they are also slightly more likely to be women. (Women in “outer circle” staff positions were slightly more likely to answer the survey than their male counterparts.) It appears that my sample is somewhat less likely to be married or have children, but the CMF data do not distinguish between Washington and district office staff for these categories. The CMF does find that district staffers are several years older, on average, than their Washington colleagues—40 years old versus 31—and it seems quite plausible that district staff members would be more likely to be married and have children. This would explain the difference in these numbers.

The survey also yielded a somewhat better response rate from higher-level staff members than their more junior counterparts (see Table 2). In part, this probably reflects the effect of the letter sent to chiefs of staff. It also reflects the greater accuracy of the *Congressional Yellow Book* in updating staff changes for certain staff members. Senior staff members, who exit their positions less frequently, are more likely than junior members to have their names accurately listed. Schedulers, who receive a very large number of letters and phone calls in regard to the member's appointments, may also be more likely to have their names listed correctly. Since accurate names are necessary for e-mail survey solicitations, this likely produced a slight bias toward these staff members.

The survey asked a variety of closed-ended questions regarding career history, plans, and attitudes. There were a few opportunities for respondents to expand on

TABLE 2. Distribution of Survey Respondents across Job Titles

Job title	Average number per office, as calculated by the CMA	Percent of House personal office staff (extrapolated from CMA data)	Percent of survey respondents	Difference
Chief of Staff	0.99	12.4	17.9	5.5
Legislative Director	0.87	10.9	14.4	3.5
Press Secretary	0.75	9.4	8.0	-1.4
Office Manager	0.60	7.5	7.3	-3.9
Systems Administrator	0.30	3.8	(combined)	
Legislative Assistant (Priority)	1.30	16.3	28.2	-4.7
Legislative Assistant (General)	1.33	16.6	(combined)	
Scheduler	0.45	5.6	6.0	4.7
Legislative Correspondent	0.63	7.9	6.2	-1.9
Staff Assistant	0.77	9.6		-3.4

their answers with open-ended text; these data are not explored here. Survey data indicate that on the whole, respondents are happy with their positions. Approximately 81% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "On the whole, I am satisfied with my job in the House."

One item stated, "How likely are you to seek employment outside of Congress (House or Senate) within the next three years?" Responses reflected a 5-point scale, from very unlikely to very likely. This item is the basis for the dependent variable. By identifying those staff members likely to leave the Hill within the next three years, the data capture those who expect to leave before the end of the next Congress. By selecting a three-year time frame, the variable can capture the exit plans not only of those who are actively searching for a new position at the time of the survey, but also those whose exit plans are less concrete. At the same time, projecting into the future through the next Congress is not such a far-reaching time horizon that stated expectations become simple guesses. Since House staff members move quickly from position to position, and office to office, gaining experience that benefits the institution of Congress, I investigate staffers' likelihood to leave Congress rather than their current members' office.

While some studies of federal government employee careers use actual exit data (e.g., Lewis 1991), many studies use survey items measuring a desire to pursue other jobs (e.g., Daley 1992; Rusbult and Lowery 1985; Wilson 1994). Using survey data has the advantage of capturing more of the decision process than actual exit data.<sup>4</sup>

## MODELING THE LIKELIHOOD TO LEAVE THE HILL

So do solidary, purposive, and material benefits influence congressional staff members' likelihood to leave a job—and if so, how much? To answer this question, I

use ordered logistic regression to examine how these incentives influence House staffers' expectations to leave the Hill. I use 11 variables to operationalize these three benefits.<sup>5</sup> The wording of the attitudinal items was adapted from the surveys and analyses of Costantini (1990) and Costantini and King (1984), whose factor analyses confirmed that the measures appropriately reflect different motivational dimensions. I also include four demographic characteristics in the model as control variables.

Solidary benefits can be derived from specific relationships between individuals, or from the broader social benefits that result from group interactions. House offices can have an *esprit de corps* that is akin to that of a baseball team, offering tremendous collective solidary benefits. For some, working on the Hill yields a relationship with a sponsoring member of Congress that can yield not only professional opportunities but also a personal bond firmly forged in political maelstroms. To tap the influence of solidary benefits, I use three variables. The first two—satisfaction with relationships with other staff members and satisfaction with being in a political environment—reflect the powerful but diffuse social ties that are fundamental to working in Congress, and fall under Wilson's (1995) category of collective solidary benefits. The third—having close ties to one's member of Congress—would be categorized by Wilson as a specific solidary benefit (although as noted earlier, it might also have a material benefit). I hypothesize that these three variables will have a negative effect on the likelihood to leave the Hill.

To measure purposive motivations, I use four items capturing different public service dimensions of working in Congress. Three items tap a normative commitment to policy, party or the broader public: a concern for policy issues and the state of society; loyalty to political party; and loyalty to one's broader community. One item, the belief that the House of Representatives is a rewarding place to work, captures the broader purposive benefits of Hill employment. I expect that each of these factors will decrease a staff member's desire to leave the Hill. The House of Representatives provides one of the best workplaces available to pursue one's purposive goals, be they commitment to a particular policy, interest group or geographic region, or political party. While Congress is not the only political institution in town, it provides more opportunity for impact than either most lobbying opportunities—where an individual is limited by outsider status—or executive agency positions that may have little policymaking potential. Romzek and Utter (1996; 1997) find evidence of public service motivation among congressional staffers: "The fundamental motivation of congressional staffers is to be part of a process that affords opportunities to influence public policy" (1996, 422). Furthermore, few workplaces, save the White House or a political party itself, are as partisan as Congress. Indeed, Romzek and Utter (1997) identify partisanship as a professional norm among congressional staff members. Congress is one of the few workplaces where sharing the partisan affiliation of one's boss is a necessity of employment.

Of course, there are two key material incentives that are fundamental to any job: its salary and its work hours. To measure the influence of these material benefits,



I use two survey items on an individual's satisfaction with salary and satisfaction with work hours. With each characteristic, I expect that the desire to leave the Hill will decrease as satisfaction increases. Salary and work hours are not the only two material benefits that employees value; for example, health care benefits are likely valued by nearly all employees. As all Hill staffers have access to the same health care plans, however, and as white-collar professionals are likely to have health care benefits at most other jobs they might consider, this benefit is unlikely to be a crucial reason for leaving or staying on the Hill. Other benefits, such as the access to child care or opportunities for travel, are less widely desired by Hill staffers. Thus I opted for parsimony, modeling the two broadly desired material benefits that affect staff members from day to day. Two additional variables tap material benefits that are likely to accrue in the future, as a staff member's professional career progresses. I have mentioned that very few staff members work on the Hill until retirement age; most exit to other jobs, and some come to the Hill specifically to earn their political stripes. This means that future career options will influence the likelihood to leave the Hill. The model includes two variables that capture satisfaction with a job's ability to lead to future positions: satisfaction with gaining good work experience, and satisfaction with opportunities for advancement.<sup>6</sup> DeHoog and Whitaker (1990) theorize that characteristics that make one attractive to other employers, such as professional training experience, act to pull an employee from his current position. Consistent with this, I hypothesize that staffers who believe they are gaining good experience will be more likely to leave the Hill. Staff members who believe that they have opportunities for advancement will be more likely to remain, however.

I include four control variables for demographic characteristics of respondents. I control for age, tenure, and gender. These characteristics that are widely considered predictive of employee turnover (Barnes and Jones 1974; Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner 2000); age and tenure in particular have the reputation of playing a role in how long Hill staff members stay on the Hill. Most young staffers without much experience move out, rather than up. I also include a dichotomous variable for race. There are some drawbacks to lumping black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American staff members together, as their experiences can vary greatly, but the small proportion of people of color in the sample limits the ability to control for specific racial and ethnic backgrounds. As it is, the race variable will identify whether nonwhites exhibit different exit intentions than whites. Motherhood can be particularly difficult to balance with Hill demands (Foerstel and Foerstel 1996), but since the sample contains only a handful of women who have young children at home, I do not include a variable for motherhood. A variable for parenthood was not statistically significant, and is not included in the final model. Though it is unusual to see a congressional model that does not include political party as a control variable, there is no link in the scholarly literature between party identification and political employment patterns. Furthermore, party ID was not statistically significant (in this or any other model I tested), and is not included in the final model.

Finally, my research design needed to reflect the considerable literature indicating that senior and junior staff members have different career considerations (Fox and Hammond 1977; Romzek and Utter 1996; Salisbury and Shepsle 1981). For example, long hours in the office might not concern an energetic junior staff member looking to work his or her way up as much as a senior staff member who is older and has more professional stature. A senior staff member might be less focused on personal staff relationships than the junior staffer for whom office contacts form the basis of a social life. Low-level staff members typically filter through House offices at a fairly rapid pace; they tend not to stay in a given position for very long, and their supervisors do not expect that they will. While administrative personnel such as office manager and scheduler might accrue more years in their position than some other staff members, the positions do not have high levels of prestige. The elite positions maximize both salary and prestige, if not length of tenure.

Following the Congressional Management Foundation (2003), I classify administrative assistants, legislative directors, and press secretaries as “executive positions” in an office. Romzek and Utter indicate that these staffers are likely to comprise the “inner circle . . . who have the trust and confidence of the member of Congress to handle discreetly the most delicate or sensitive political issues;” other junior and mid-level personal office staff members comprise the “outer circle” in an office (Romzek and Utter 1996, 420). Of course, variation in staff roles occurs across offices. A trusted, experienced legislative assistant might have considerable access to a member of Congress, but he or she would still be situated under the legislative director. It is also difficult to account for individual office variation in a general model. These three positions certainly carry significant weight in nearly every office—and are the staff members that representatives are most likely to wish to retain. They are therefore of special interest in this analysis.

Pooling the executive staff members and other staff members in one regression analysis would yield misleading estimates of the independent variables’ effects. To appropriately model these effects, I could run one model across all staff levels, including an explanatory variable for job title and appropriate interaction terms for job title and other variables. The resulting model would be both cumbersome and more difficult to interpret, however. On the other hand, running two sets of regressions allows us to easily evaluate whether the same factors influence exit in both groups. I chose the latter approach, which allows us to look separately at executive staff exit—the biggest concern for Congress—and still gain insights from the comparison to junior and mid-level staff positions.

As the survey response item used for the dependent variable has a 5-point scale, I used ordered logistic regression for the models. The likelihood-ratio test of proportionality of odds across response categories was statistically insignificant in both models, indicating that the parallel lines assumption was not violated. Descriptive statistics for each survey item are presented in Appendix 1. Exact wordings for the survey items can be found in Appendix 2.

TABLE 3. Explaining the Expectation to Leave the Hill Within Three Years

	Junior and Mid-Level Staff	Marginal Impact <sup>a</sup>	Executive Staff	Marginal Impact <sup>a</sup>
<b><i>Solidary Incentives:</i></b>				
Satisfaction with staff relationships	−0.017 (0.179)		0.235 (0.198)	
Satisfaction with being in a political environment	0.032 (0.200)		−0.217 (0.252)	
Close career ties to Congressman	0.070 (0.111)		−0.281** (0.131)	−4.76%
<b><i>Purposive Incentives:</i></b>				
Work is rewarding	−0.513** (0.218)	−11.66%	−0.719*** (0.252)	−10.71%
Commitment to political party	−0.134 (0.143)		−0.418** (0.187)	−6.81%
Commitment to community	−0.290* (0.174)	−6.81%	0.070 (0.205)	
Interest in public policy	0.474*** (0.169)	11.75%	0.118 (0.215)	
<b><i>Material Incentives:</i></b>				
<u>Current benefits</u>				
Satisfaction with salary	−0.148 (0.143)		−0.499*** (0.176)	−5.69%
Satisfaction with work hours	−0.064 (0.142)		−0.108 (0.158)	
<u>Benefits accruing for future employment</u>				
Gaining good work experience	−0.165 (0.228)		0.874*** (0.256)	12.41%
Opportunities for advancement	−0.346* (0.182)	−7.19%	−0.618*** (0.191)	−9.49%
<b><i>Demographic Controls:</i></b>				
Age	−0.067 (0.134)		−0.330** (0.145)	−6.54%
Years worked in Congress	−0.132*** (0.043)	−3.17%	0.022 (0.036)	
Female	0.225 (0.297)		−0.078 (0.354)	
Nonwhite	0.356 (0.430)		0.246 (0.559)	
Cutpoint 1	−7.307*** (1.386)		−9.558*** (1.911)	
Cutpoint 2	−5.975*** (1.353)		−7.647*** (1.851)	
Cutpoint 3	−5.363*** (1.339)		−6.597*** (1.830)	
Cutpoint 4	−3.757*** (1.309)		−5.028*** (1.792)	

\*\*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\* =  $p < .05$ ; \* =  $p < .10$  (2-tailed tests).

$n = 185$

$n = 142$

Standard errors in parentheses.

LR  $\chi^2(15) = 68.84$

LR  $\chi^2(15) = 68.75$

<sup>a</sup>Marginal impact for years worked is the change in the predicted probability when moving from 3 to 4 years on the Hill. Marginal impact for age is the change in the predicted probability when moving from the category for 27–29 years of age to 30–35 years of age. For all other variables, it is the change in the predicted probability when the value of the explanatory variable moves from 4 to 5 (e.g., from agree to strongly agree), holding all other variables at their modal value for each group.

## ANALYSIS

Table 3 presents the results from the logistic regression analyses, as well as the marginal impact of all statistically significant explanatory variables. What influences House exits the most: solidary benefits, purposive benefits, or material benefits? Though the effects vary by both type of specific incentive and level of staff member, purposive and material benefits clearly carry the most weight.

Three of four material incentive variables have a statistically significant effect on executive staff members. Let's look at a typical executive-level respondent. He is a senior staff member, 34 years old, white, and has worked in Congress for

six years. If he strongly disagreed that he was satisfied with his salary, he would be more than three times more likely to leave the Hill than if he strongly agreed that he was satisfied with his salary.<sup>7</sup> Though this effect is very sizeable, it is not particularly surprising; if anything is surprising, it is that this variable does not matter in the junior and mid-level staff model. Executive staffers are paid more—in some cases very substantially more—than their junior counterparts, so why should they be more sensitive to salary concerns? There are three possible answers. First, it is the executive staff members who can leave the Hill for the best-paying positions elsewhere; they have the best experience and probably the best contacts, and they can capitalize on those should they take a job off the Hill. Junior and mid-level staff members do not see nearly the increase in salaries when they move to K Street (Ackley 2006). Second, these staffers have reached a more advanced stage in their lives, and they might be considering the longer-term benefits of a higher salary: buying a house, having children, and so forth. Third, as executive staffers have the highest salaries on the Hill, they have fewer possibilities for significant raises in Congress than do their more junior counterparts. If they want substantial raises, their best option is to exit.

For all the dissatisfaction with the work hours in Congress—more respondents were dissatisfied with their work hours than were satisfied—that variable was not statistically significant in either model. Perhaps any effect is masked by this general dissatisfaction with work hours. The two variables tapping material benefits down the road, satisfaction with opportunities for advancement and satisfaction with gaining good work experience, were highly statistically significant in the executive staff model; satisfaction with opportunities for advancement had a modest effect on lower-level staff members, but with only a 90% level of confidence. As expected, our executive staff member who is very dissatisfied with his opportunities for advancement is more than three times more likely than his very dissatisfied counterparts to expect to exit within three years, holding constant all other factors. Also as expected, being very satisfied with gaining good work experience leads executive staff members to be more likely to leave the Hill than their very dissatisfied counterparts. This is consistent with DeHoog and Whitaker's (1990) findings that credentials pull one toward other employment options. It is important to note, however, that few staffers indicated that they were not satisfied with gaining good work experience.

Among executive staff members, two variables reflecting purposive benefits influence the likelihood to leave congressional employment. The first variable in this category is finding work in the House of Representatives rewarding. This is one of only two variables to produce statistically significant effects in both models.<sup>8</sup> Predicted probabilities drawn from each model indicate in each case that finding the work rewarding is highly statistically significant and substantively powerful in both cases. Believing that working in the House of Representatives is rewarding has a strong, negative effect on the likelihood to leave. If our executive staffer

strongly agreed that the Hill is rewarding, he would be more than 60% less likely to exit than if he were neutral. (Again, no staffer strongly disagreed that the Hill is rewarding; most responses to this survey item were distributed between “strongly agree” and “neutral.”) The effect for lower-level staff members is less powerful. A typical junior or mid-level staffer—say, a 24 year-old white woman—who strongly agrees that working in the House is rewarding would be more than one-third less likely to leave the Hill than if she were neutral.

Loyalty to one's political party and party leaders decreases executive staff members' likelihood of leaving the Hill, although this effect is less substantial than most others. Senior House staff members who deal with policy work in a partisan world. While some jobs would allow one to move in a partisan arena to the same extent as a House office—working directly for a political party or campaign, or perhaps working in a political position within the executive branch—most other jobs would be less partisan. It is notable that the party loyalty variable is insignificant for more junior staff members; perhaps party loyalty increases with time and responsibility on the Hill.

The variable tapping a concern for policy issues produced an unexpected outcome, increasing the likelihood of exit for junior and mid-level staffers. If our 24-year-old staff member strongly agreed that she was motivated by a concern for policy issues, her likelihood to exit would be 53%; if she were neutral, her likelihood to exit would be 30%. This is not the predicted effect, but I would like to present a possible explanation. Most of the staff positions in the junior and mid-level category are not policy positions. Staff assistants, legislative correspondents, schedulers and the like do not manage policy issues in any direct way. Even legislative assistants who do not handle a House member's committee portfolio might feel they have minimal influence on the policy process. As Hugh Heclo's (1978) work on issue networks made clear, Congress is not the only policy game in town. If a staffer has an interest in policy, he or she can leave one of these positions and take a job with a trade association or nonprofit and work on some substantive policy area. One hypothesis is that the results here indicate that for junior and mid-level staff members at least, the means to pursue public policy concerns are located off the Hill. More research is necessary before we can draw any firm conclusions.

What of solidary benefits? Only one variable was statistically significant, and only in the executive staff model. The effect of having close ties to a particular member of Congress does decrease the expected likelihood of executive staff members to exit the Hill, as expected, although the effect is only weakly statistically significant. This result is consistent with the findings of Salisbury and Schepsle (1981). There is no effect for junior and mid-level staff members; perhaps this is because these staffers are less likely to have cultivated an especially close relationship with their representative.

## DISCUSSION

Hill staffers sometimes seem to have a love-hate relationship with their jobs. They love the excitement and ability to “make a difference” (CMF 1995); they hate the stress, the hours, and the low pay. These are attitudes that are well known on the Hill. They also sum up the conflicting attitudes that might lead some successful staff members to stay on the Hill, while many more flee to better paying and more stable, if less exciting and prestigious, workplaces.

Purposive benefits influence job exit plans for staff members at all professional levels. Yet it is only in the executive staff model that material incentives carry much weight. The junior and mid-level staff members do not seem to be influenced by typical issues of job satisfaction such as salary, opportunities for advancement, and so forth. Perhaps this is because many of these staff members know that regardless of job satisfaction, the Hill is a short-term stop on their professional careers. Alternatively, they could be young enough, and early enough in their careers, not to focus on factors—again, salary and advancement are good examples—that will gain more importance as their careers progress.

It is likely that junior staff members’ low pay is balanced by finding the Hill rewarding. After all, if junior and mid-level staff members really wanted high salaries, generous benefits, and the like, they probably would not have been drawn to work for a member of Congress in the first place. A commitment to public policy also motivates junior staff members—but it leads them to be more likely to leave the Hill, not less. Perhaps those low and mid-level jobs do not offer the policymaking impact that the people who hold them desire.

Executive staff members are also motivated by public service. Finding Congress rewarding matters, as does party loyalty. Perhaps for these staff members, Romzek and Utter (1996, 1997) offer the best explanation: staffers who continue to work on the Hill do so because of their commitment to some aspect of politics and public service.

Yet staffers in executive positions begin to be susceptible to day-to-day professional concerns and personal needs. Money starts to matter. Good work experience becomes important in professional decision making. Public service motivation still matters, but utilitarian concerns begin to play an important role in career plans.

If there is a take-home message regarding House staff policy, it is that junior and senior staffers have different motivations and patterns—and this has implications for staffing policy. Writing 30 years ago, Fox and Hammond (1977, 35) describe the different traits that members seek from their hires. “For some positions, Congressmen look for bright young aides with new ideas, but an expectation of short tenure; continuity and stability are achieved by longer tenure of top-level senior aides. We would also speculate that Congressmen recognize the somewhat frenetic schedule of Hill life and accept a relatively high turnover in some jobs as a *quid quo pro* for continuity and experience in others, but require competence throughout.” Romzek and Utter (1996) state that turnover is not an major issue of

concern to elected representatives or senior staff, but they go on to argue that even if turnover among lower level staff is fairly costless, turnover of senior staff brings with it a loss of institutional knowledge and expertise that is problematic.

Congress does need a subset of these staffers to stay for the long haul, and therein lies the shortcoming of this structure. While a large number of staff members may be shorter termers—and members of Congress are not concerned about turnover among this group—Congress needs senior staff with extensive experience and institutional memory. This suggests that a bifurcated model for staff retention might be in order. First, members of Congress could better compensate its executive staff members. This very well might require an increase in office budgets, but the increase to the overall budget for congressional operations would be modest indeed. In some offices, this could be achieved by hiring fewer staff members and paying them better. While Congress would not be able to offer the salaries that senior executive staff members working for prominent members could acquire at a trade association, it could work to offer salaries that are more in line with the salaries these staff members could earn at government agencies. Second, members could work more actively to cultivate certain staff members as potential long-term employees. House offices are not known for staff development efforts. While informal mentoring is valuable, it is not the same as structured training and professional development opportunities. Such cultivation of senior staff is likely to help combat the burnout that senior staff members feel, the same burnout that leads them to find their work less rewarding over time.

Third, flextime and comp time could become standard—allowing staff more flexibility to take time out of the office when Congress is not in session. Open-ended responses from the few female staff members with young children also indicated that flexible scheduling (including comp time and flexible leave during recesses, and the availability of half-time positions) was a key reason they were happy in their positions. Though satisfaction with work hours was not statistically significant in either model, there is likely a selection effect here—those who find Hill work hours extremely problematic would not stay to reach an executive position. Even if Congress as an institution did not move to a floor schedule that eliminated late nights—a well-known frustration among both staff and members themselves—individual offices could pursue policies that are more family-friendly. Importantly, this would also serve as a positive signal to staff members who might need such flexibility down the road. As academics know, flexible summers (or August recesses) are tremendous perquisites, especially in jobs that are not financially well compensated.

Of course, there are risks working for an elected official, and these unquestionably influence staff career decision making. An employee working in the congressional relations office of a federal agency or a Washington law firm doesn't have to worry that the entire office could fold up and disappear in a year or two. But in essence, that is the situation that congressional staff members face if their bosses retire or lose their reelection bids. My fourth suggestion would help address

this instability. Party leadership could stress to members of Congress that experienced senior staff members are valuable and worth retaining—and worth seeking out when hiring.

Given that House personal offices operate as 435 independent staffing operations, and members typically are hesitant to implement practices that might impinge on their political needs, it is unlikely that these offices would implement these suggestions broadly. Nonetheless, savvy House members would benefit from structuring policies and practices to retain those experienced senior staff members who are valuable to both the members themselves and the broader institution of Congress.

## NOTES

1. Topics have included who wants to work for the federal government (Lewis and Frank 2002); job satisfaction and dissatisfaction among government employees (e.g., Rusbult and Lowery 1985; Daley 1992; Ting 1997); job exit among both the regular civil service (Lewis 1991) and the Senior Executive Service (Wilson 1994); and public service motivation (Perry and Wise 1990), among others.
2. The Congressional Management Foundation biennial employment studies survey chiefs of staff to gather demographic information on all staff members in a given office. Fox and Hammond (1977) rely on in-depth interviews and surveys of professional staff, but congressional staff career opportunities have changed much since the 1970s, and updated data are warranted.
3. The CMF study was drawn from questionnaires completed by chiefs of staff about each member of their office staffs; the widely-cited CMF studies focus primarily on demographic characteristics, salaries, and work experience of staff members. The CMF's 2002 House study collected data on more than 2,000 staff members. The sample of responding offices is generally very representative of the larger population of House personal offices, though the CMF notes that offices of freshmen and sophomore representatives are slightly overrepresented and office of African-American representatives are somewhat underrepresented.
4. Due to strict human subjects protocol constraints, survey responses did not contain individual identifiers; as a result, it is not possible to match survey responses with actual job exit data.
5. As all those surveyed worked in the House of Representatives at the same time, certain institutional or economic characteristics are constant and thus are not included in the model. For example, important factors might include a change in the partisan control of the executive branch (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981) or the current unemployment rate (Hom and Kinicki 2001), but these cannot be included in a model using data from one point in time. Characteristics of individual personal offices might also influence likelihood to exit; for example, Sheridan (1992) finds that organizational culture influences job tenure, and Salisbury and Shepsle (1981) find that House of Representatives committee staff members are more likely to exit when there is a change of committee chairs. Since the survey did not focus on characteristics of the employee's office, and did not identify the particular member for whom a respondent worked, these characteristics are also beyond the scope of this analysis. Thus, the model presented here situates itself within the literature on how individual characteristics and attitudes influence the likelihood to leave an employment situation.
6. Correlated at .48, satisfaction with gaining good work experience and satisfaction with opportunities for advancement seem to be tapping benefits that accrue to different groups of staffers. Senior staff members are more likely to be pleased with the opportunities for advancement, while junior job members are more satisfied with their opportunities to gain good work experience.,
7. To calculate the predicted probabilities, all other variables were set at their median response values. As men were slightly more than 50% of executive staff respondents, my hypothetical executive staff member is male. As women were the majority of junior and mid-level respondents (a plurality of whom were legislative assistants), my illustration for this level respondent is female.
8. Allison (1999) and Hoetker (2004) provide a word of caution when interpreting the magnitude of coefficients across groups. Hoetker (2004, 1) explains: "Logit and probit coefficients are scaled by the unknown variance of their residual variation. Naïvely comparing coefficients as one would in linear models assumes that residual variation is the same across groups, though in many cases it may merely reflect the difference in residual



variation across groups, rather than real differences in the impact of coefficients across groups." To gauge the size of the effect *within* the two groups, I present illustrations of the size of the effect for each model.

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## APPENDIX 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable name	Number of observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<b><i>Dependent Variable:</i></b>					
Likelihood of leaving the Hill within the next three years ( <i>1 to 5 scale, very unlikely to very likely</i> )	368	3.56	1.34	1	5
<b><i>Solidary Incentives:</i></b>					
Satisfaction with staff relationships	429	4.06	0.89	1	5
Satisfaction with being in a political environment	428	4.24	0.92	1	5
Close career ties to Congressman	383	3.35	1.33	1	5
<b><i>Purposive Incentives:</i></b>					
Work is rewarding	379	4.21	0.73	2	5
Commitment to political party	408	3.38	1.07	1	5
Commitment to community	409	3.88	1.06	1	5
Interest in public policy	409	3.98	1.06	1	5
<b><i>Material Incentives:</i></b>					
<u>Current benefits</u>					
Satisfaction with salary	428	2.82	1.14	1	5
Satisfaction with work hours	428	2.92	1.12	1	5
<u>Benefits accruing for future employment</u>					
Satisfaction with gaining good work experience	428	4.35	0.82	1	5
Satisfaction with opportunities for advancement	427	3.45	1.06	1	5
<b><i>Demographic Controls:</i></b>					
Age ( <i>1 = 23 and younger; 8 = 60 and older</i> )	442	3.51	1.85	1	8
Years worked in Congress	441	6.12	6.50	1	32
Female ( <i>1 = female; 0 = male</i> )	440	0.51	0.50	0	1
Nonwhite ( <i>1 = nonwhite; 0 = white</i> )	438	0.14	0.34	0	1

All attitudinal variables were coded on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the most positive response (i.e., very important, strongly agree, or very satisfied). Complete item wordings are listed in Appendix 2.

## APPENDIX 2: Survey Items

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### *Dependent Variable:*

- How likely is it that you will seek employment outside of Congress (both House and Senate) within the next three years?  
(Very unlikely; Unlikely; Neutral; Likely; Very likely; don't know. "Don't know" was recoded to "Neutral" for analysis.)

### *Attitudinal Variables:*

- The House of Representatives is a rewarding place to work. (Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neutral; Agree; Strongly agree)
- I feel that my career advancement has been closely tied to the political career of one particular member (Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neutral; Agree; Strongly agree)
- People pursue careers in politics for many different reasons. Please rate the impact of the following factors on a scale from 1 to 5.  
(1 = This factor is not important to you at all; 5 = This factor is extremely important to you.)
  - A concern for policy issues and the state of society (for example, a commitment to some set of substantive public policy issues)
  - A sense of loyalty to political party or party leaders
  - A sense of loyalty to the community in general (such as your sense of loyalty and commitment to your congressional district or state, or the country as a whole)
- Please rate the following aspects of your job from 1 to 5.  
(1 = Not at all satisfying; 5 = Very satisfying)
  - Salary
  - Relationships with other staff members
  - Being in a political environment
  - Opportunities for advancement
  - Work hours
  - Gaining good work experience

### *Demographic Controls:*

- How old are you?
  - About how many years have you worked in Congress? (Please total the years you worked in all jobs in the House and Senate combined.)
  - What is your sex?
  - Which race/ethnicity best describes you?  
(African-American/Black; Asian; Latino; White; Other)
-

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