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# Thinking about my Generation: The Impact of Large Congressional Cohorts

**Abstract:** Large partisan congressional “classes,” once common, have become more the exception than the rule over the past 60 years. Thus, when they come along, as in 1974 and 1994 (and perhaps 2010), they receive a lot of attention. Moreover, they often do help to change the institution of the House in dramatic ways. After a few years, all such classes lose their distinctiveness and meld into the legislative flow of the era. Still, these cohorts may have lasting effects in a host of ways, from movement into House power positions, to successful attempts to run for the Senate in large numbers, to the dispersion of many individuals into the Washington milieu of lobbyists and lawyers, where they can continue to affect policy. This article takes a first cut at how large partisan classes affect the institution of Congress, as well as at the careers of their individual members. Both the 1994 and 1974 cohorts were important as they burst upon the scene. Yet they have had differing impacts as the “long tail” of these classes continues to make a mark on politics and policy.

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## Introduction

“We didn’t owe anything to any ward heelers. We were pretty brash, not scared. We didn’t know that we shouldn’t take on a [committee] chairman.”

– Rep. Floyd Fithian, freshman Democrat from Class of 1974

“We first sent a letter to each chairman asking that they come to one of the [Class of 1974s pre-organizational caucus] meetings and talk a little about their committee. To a person, we got back polite notes saying “No.” So then we sent a second letter saying that we were going to vote en masse against any chairman who didn’t come. They all came. Even [F. Edward] Hebert [Armed Services chair], who showed up the day before the Super Bowl in New Orleans.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Both quoted in Burdett Loomis, *The New American Politician* (New York: Basic, 1988).

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Even before they were sworn in, the 75 members of the House Democratic class of 1975 had changed the way business was conducted in the US House, often bucking the party leadership as they sought to influence various organizational decisions. Within 3 weeks of their swearing in, they had proven instrumental in ousting three sitting committee chairs, including Hebert. Thus began an auspicious run for the members of this cohort, who initially held great sway within party caucus decision-making and who subsequently, over the next few years, advanced quickly into committee and leadership positions that they had helped to create.

Twenty years later, another large partisan class helped usher in a new and historic Republican era in the US House. Like the Democratic newcomers 20 years before, even before they took the oath of office, this cohort aggressively worked to change the rules of the game. As Linda Killian recounted in her extensive examination of this group, “They were all for term limits, so why shouldn’t they term-limit committee chairs and even the Speaker? Newt Gingrich learned of their little idea by reading about it in the paper.... So the first day it was in session, the 104th Congress passed a rule limiting the Speaker of the House to four terms. The freshmen didn’t know how Gingrich would react when he read about their comments, but when nothing did happen, it gave them courage...Every time they pushed a little further and got away with it, it just made them bolder.”<sup>2</sup>

By and large, the modern US Congress is a model of year-to-year continuity, despite profound long-term changes across the decades. The membership tends to remain stable. Even when there is a major upheaval – such as in 1992 when reapportionment, redistricting, and the House “bank” crisis took its toll across party lines – 75-to-80% of sitting members return. In many congresses, such as the 105th (1997–1998) through the 109th (2005–2006), only a trickle of new members enters the chamber. But from time to time, large “classes” of new members come into the House, often with overwhelming numbers of either Republicans or Democrats. These classes, such as the heavily Democratic “Watergate Babies” of 1974 or the horde of Republicans in Newt Gingrich’s 1994 cohort, can quickly and powerfully change the nature of the institution, often strengthening the hand of leaders like Gingrich or the insurgent Democratic reformers of the 1960s and early 1970s. The most recent landslide class, from the GOP wave of 2010, may well stand beside these previous two groups in their impact on the institution, for better or worse.

Journalists circa 1974–1975, and both scholars<sup>3</sup> and journalists circa 1994–1995, gave great attention to these large, partisan cohorts (75 new Democrats in

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Killian, *The Freshmen* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Barnett, *Legislative Learning: The 104th Republican Freshmen in the House* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999); C. Lawrence Evans and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress under Fire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Learning to Govern* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1997); David Maraniss and Michael Weisskopf, *Tell Newt to Shut Up* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

1974; 73 new Republicans in 1994), and with good reason. The Watergate class provided both the votes and the energy that helped Democratic Study Group reformers accelerate their attacks on the seniority system, most notably with their early contribution to defeating three sitting chairs at the start of the 94th Congress. Even more consequentially, the 104th's GOP first-termers provided the core of Gingrich's broadside assault on committee seniority. Moreover, both classes shook up the institution and caused a reexamination of the linkages between individual members, legislative party leaders, and committee (and subcommittee) chairs.

Congressional classes/cohorts rarely make news for very long; often they do not survive at the polls. The Watergate babies survived extremely well until 1980, when the Reagan landslide helped push some marginal and weaker legislators to the side. The 104th Republican legislators did not face a serious Democratic wave election until 2006, but still they lost many members of the class during these 12 years. Overall, and unsurprisingly, legislators from these and other large classes do leave the House for a host of reasons, and the distinctiveness of any given cohort fades.

But that does not mean that the impact of large partisan cohorts necessarily diminishes. Rather, it may change form and remain profound. A large partisan class ushers into Congress a host of individuals with similar backgrounds and worldviews, who were propelled within a distinct set of political circumstances. Even as their numbers decline, their impact may grow, as they become (sub) committee chairs, party leaders, and achieve higher office. So, during the 40 years after the Class of 1974 burst upon the scene, its final two continuously serving members, Californians Henry Waxman and George Miller, both retiring in 2014, have proven exceptionally important in terms of producing meaningful policy change across a range of issues. In a sense, such members and their accomplishments represent the "long tail" of decisions that voters made 1974.

To an extent, the impact of large partisan classes is a matter of mathematics. At first, if the cohort votes together, it can move the caucus toward policy changes and procedural reforms. As time passes, large classes can also benefit from the observation made by novelist Ward Just's fictional congressman, Lou LaRuth, "There are 435 members of the House, and about a quarter are quite smart."<sup>4</sup> Although some of the less-smart ones will have long careers, the chances are that the best legislators will prosper – whether in the House, in other elected office, or in various subsequent endeavors. The wave election that elevated them to the House meant that they had ascended to "national politician" status, albeit on the lowest rung of that ladder. In addition, as Glenn Parker observes in his

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<sup>4</sup> Ward Just, "The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert," in *The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert and 21 Stories and Novellas*. (New York: Mariner, 1998).

book, *Capitol Investments*, serving as a Member of Congress can allow legislators to accumulate a host of skills that will serve them well, long after they have left Congress.<sup>5</sup>

In this piece, we will lay out some of the implications of the election of large partisan classes. But we can only scratch the surface among populations that enter the Congress together, make their immediate mark, and then move on in their individual ways. There are patterns, to be sure, but these gaggles of legislators carve out their own distinctive careers, producing a mosaic of ambition, choice, defeat, and evolution.

## A Brief History of Large Partisan Classes

The 104th Republican freshman class in the US House of Representatives is generally viewed as one of several highly consequential House partisan cohorts in the post-JFK Great Society era. Elected in November of 1994 and 73 members strong, the relatively cohesive group came to office with the most media fanfare of any House freshman class since the political insurgency of the Democratic Watergate Babies class in the elections of 1974.

That Democratic class, 75 members strong and in some ways a model to the subsequent rising Republican class, made the 94th Congress a memorable one, especially for progressive Democratic activists wishing to offset the influence of conservative southern Democratic legislators in the House. As things stood in 1974, the House was less liberal than strong Democratic numbers made it appear on the surface. Twenty straight years of Democratic Party control in the House had allowed considerable influence to be vested in senior members, with those from the South holding many committee and subcommittee chairmanships because the South's near-one party system afforded longevity of service to the region's lawmakers.

Prior to the 1950s, large freshman classes frequently appeared in the US House, sometimes creating back-and-forth control of the chamber. Since 1950, however, relative partisan stability has dominated. Thus, from 1950 to 2014, only six uncommonly large, influential, and partisan freshman cohorts entered the House: Democrats in 1958 (86th Congress), 1964 (89th), and 1974 (94th), along with the Republicans in 1966 (90th), 1994 (104th), and 2010 (112th). (See Table 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Glenn Parker *Capitol Investments: The Marketability of Political Skills* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

**Table 1** Large, Partisan First-term House Cohorts, 1867–2014.

Congress	Years	Seats	Seat Gain	(Seats)	Party Gain %	Chamber %	Party
42	1871–1873	243	67>104	(37)	55%	15%	D
43	1873–1875	243/292	136>199	(63)	46%	22%	R
44	1875–1877	292/293	88>182	(94)	107%	32%	D
45	1877–1879	293	103>136	(33)	32%	11%	R*
48	1883–1885	293/325	128>196	(68)	53%	21%	D
52	1891–1893	332	152>238	(86)	57%	26%	D
54	1895–1897	356/357	124>254	(130)	105%	36%	R
56	1899–1901	357	124>161	(37)	30%	10%	D*
59	1905–1907	386	207>251	(44)	21%	11%	R#
62	1911–1913	391/394	172>230	(58)	35%	15%	D
64	1915–1917	391/435	134>196	(62)	46%	14%	R*
67	1921–1923	435	240>302	(62)	26%	14%	R#
68	1923–1925	435	131–207	(76)	58%	17%	D*
72	1931–1933	435	164>216	(52)	32%	12%	D
73	1933–1935	435	216>313	(97)	45%	22%	D#
76	1939–1941	435	88>169	(81)	29%	11%	R*
80	1947–1949	435	189>246	(57)	30%	13%	R
81	1949–1951	435	188>263	(75)	40%	17%	D
86	1959–1961	435	232>283	(61)	22%	12%	D#
90	1967–1969	435	140>187	(47)	34%	11%	R*
94	1975–1977	435	243>292	(49)	20%	11%	D#
104	1995–1997	435	176>228	(52)	30%	12%	R
112	2011–2013	435	178>242	(64)	36%	15%	R

\*Did not capture majority.

#Added to existing majority.

Source: <http://history.house.gov>.

Although much of our attention will be directed largely at the 1974 Democrats and the 1994 Republicans, it is worth taking a brief look at the other large partisan groups. The newest of these, the 112th GOP freshman class of 2011, has already made its mark in adding to the polarization and gridlock on Capitol Hill. With its Tea Party insurgents, this group, while highly partisan, has posed many obstacles for the House GOP leadership.<sup>6</sup> The 112th Congress returned majority control back to the Republicans and Speaker John Boehner, but the jury remains out as to the long-term impact of this group. It certainly has had far less immediate policy impact than either the 1974 or 1994 classes, even as it questioned our idea of how party majorities work (or do not) in the House.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Draper, *When the Tea Party Came to Town* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

In contrast to the 104th and 112th GOP cohorts, the other three large freshman groups in recent decades did not bring a change of party control to the House. The 86th Congress's Democratic freshman class, elected in 1958, vastly strengthened the party's hold on the chamber but did not shift control of committees and subcommittees. What it did do was to sweep into the House (and Senate) a group of members who would provide both votes and ideas for reform over the next 20 years. Likewise, the 90th Republican freshman class in the House, elected in 1966, helped pad the party's pitiful numbers in the chamber (up from 140 to 187). Nonetheless, this class did little to bring the party out of the wilderness, even as it did provide votes that led to victories by the chamber's powerful conservative coalition.

Setting aside the 86th and 90th partisan freshman classes in the House, the 104th and 112th GOP classes are notable because they helped their party recapture the chamber and the legislative ambition that comes with a hypothetical electoral mandate. The 89th Democratic freshman class is notable in its short-term influence because it pushed party numbers to the point that liberals could pass much of Lyndon Johnson's extensive policy agenda.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to evaluating the consequence of a new partisan cohort in the House, class size and the swing of seats in the chamber both matter.

In determining what constitutes a consequential or exceptional freshman cohort in the House, there is no standard rule. In differentiating relatively influential House classes from those of lesser import, it is possible to utilize qualitative factors as well as quantitative measures, especially as we examine the impact of a cohort over time. Here, however, for purposes of clarity and consistency, we suggest a metric based upon the total number of seats in the House – 435 in the modern era but a smaller number previously. We consider *relatively influential* freshman classes to exist whenever there is a 10% swing in the partisan control of House seats, based upon the total number of House seats available, rather than the party's gain from the number of seats held in the previous election.

## Large Partisan Classes: 1876–2014

Adopting the 10% rule allows us to examine the substantial number of 24 freshman classes over a stretch of 62 Congresses starting in 1867. The starting point is chosen because it reflects a renewal of congressional representation for states that had departed for the southern confederacy during the Civil War. Table 1 lists

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<sup>7</sup> David Mayhew, *Party Loyalty among Congressmen* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1966); James Sundquist, *Politics and Policy-Making* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1968).

US House elections in the post-Civil War era (beginning with the reconstituted US House in 1867) in which a political party met the 10% threshold for seats gained. With the Apportionment Act of 1911, House membership was set at 435 representatives, effective in 1913 (the 63rd Congress), thus setting a standard of a 44-seat gain to qualify as a major partisan class.

An examination of Table 1 suggests a US House that has become increasingly stable in recent decades, at least in terms of tidal-wave partisan swings that produce big freshman classes and an enhanced chance for major policy change. Table 1 does not, however, provide a qualitative sense of the operational power of freshman House classes. An analysis of that type requires knowledge of party leadership dynamics in the House, the political resources and prior political experience of new members, the cohesiveness of the cohort, and the degree to which the dominant cohort vision corresponds with the collective goals of the party's conference or caucus in the House.

At the minimum, the data in Table 1 suggest that large House partisan cohorts in today's world may be more polarizing than such House cohorts in the pre-Nixon era, principally because large cohorts have become uncommon following the emergence of the 1974 Watergate Babies. After all, as David Mayhew observed in 1974, the individually based electoral connection had grown increasingly powerful, thus creating "the case of the vanishing marginals," which political scientists pursued for a generation.<sup>8</sup> Most simply, fewer marginal members meant fewer large partisan swings.<sup>9</sup> And the Class of 1974 helped make this so, as they assiduously protected their gains over the next 20 years.<sup>10</sup> In the day where large classes were common – a new one every two or three elections, or less – new cohorts tended to reduce the impact of previous large swings. Moreover, relatively frequent large classes meant that those who survived, disproportionately southern Democrats, could build seniority and exercise continuing, predictable power.

## A Modern Example in this Comparative Metric

While the Republican freshmen of the 104th Congress are often treated in our time as a remarkable expression of this dynamics, it would actually be a mistake to see them as unique in terms of their cohort clout. While there is significant

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<sup>8</sup> David Mayhew, "The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," *Polity* 6, no. 3 (1974), 295–317.

<sup>9</sup> Still, both individual cases in the 1990s and the partisan swings of 2006, 2008, and 2010 demonstrate that context of electoral safety can change over time. See Gary Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 9th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2012); Thomas Mann, *Unsafe at any Margin* (Washington, DC.: American Enterprise Institution Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Loomis, *The New American Politician*.

evidence as to their cohesiveness during their first two terms in office,<sup>11</sup> Table 1 highlights the existence of other post-Civil War freshmen classes of considerable note. Quantitatively speaking, this table identifies classes that relative to the 104th GOP House class are more impressive by a number of measures. Looking at the raw percentage gain in House seats, there are seven House freshman classes that experienced the headiness associated with their party adding sufficient seats to increase their power in the chamber by over 50%. Compared with the 30% expansion of the Republican House conference in the 1994 election, the 104th freshman class did not ride the strongest of waves.

In a similar fashion, while the 1994 election expanded GOP representation by 12% of the total number of seats in the House, this gain is modest when viewed historically. To wit, in six elections since 1867 one party has increased its numbers by more than 20% of all the seats in the House, including the elections of 1874 and 1894, which exceeded 30%.<sup>12</sup>

Another possible measure for assessing the power of the 104th freshman class is the size of the new majority constituted from the entry of any given freshman class. As Table 1 denotes, the 104th House Republicans held a modest majoritarian margin of 228 seats out of 435 (52.4%). In comparison, nine other influential cohort freshman classes have enjoyed the advantage of helping their party form a majority over 60%, the average of the eight approaching 67% – the super-majority size that allowed for the override of presidential vetoes. In view of these findings, it makes sense to think of the 104th GOP House freshman class as an especially *scrappy and partisan* class: one that exercised considerable influence not merely because of turnover in the chamber, cohort vote clout, or the extent of the party's seat control, but because party-based voting jumped substantially after 1994,<sup>13</sup> even as this class reflected the growth of such voting over time.

## The Watergate Babies and the Gingrich Cohort: Adaptation and Polarization

Every congressional class, large or small, enters a particular Congress, with its own internal environment, political pressures, and relevant issues. One never

<sup>11</sup> Barnett, *Legislative Learning*.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that these two elections preceded the post-Watergate and Gingrich elections by 100 years stands as an odd historical tidbit.

<sup>13</sup> See Barnett, 1999; Fenno, 1997; Killian, 1998, among others. See also Voteview's figures, which illustrate the role of the 104th Congress. [http://voteview.com/political\\_polarization.asp](http://voteview.com/political_polarization.asp) (accessed August 18, 2014).

steps into the same river, so to speak, even as it appears the same from the bank. Thus, the 1964 Democratic cohort, with myriad talented legislators, found itself serving as “the cannon fodder for the Great Society,” as many members from swing districts compiled liberal voting records, with the upshot that 26 of 71 new Democrats in the 89th Congress lost their bids for re-election.

If the newly elected post-1974 Democrats entered a House that was more than ready to use their diverse talents, the first-term Republicans in 1995, at the opposite extreme, understood that they were part of an historic partisan movement, led by a charismatic and revolutionary Speaker. And despite having to take some difficult votes, most survived, unlike the 1964 Democrats. Even as Gingrich’s leadership fell apart over the next few years, the Class of 1994 remained part of a largely unified Republican majority in an increasingly polarized partisan chamber.

The Watergate Babies were then, in both temporal and behavioral senses, roughly in-between. “Even 10 years later, observed Rep. Butler Derrick (D-SC), in discussing how he worked to get things done in the House, “I go to my buddies in the Class of ’74. We’ve now moved up to middle management.”<sup>14</sup> For Derrick and his many surviving “buddies,” middle management meant that they served as subcommittee chairs or as members of powerful committees. Indeed, virtually all the remaining members of the Class of 1974 served in such position by their fourth terms (1981–1982).<sup>15</sup> But even as they entered the Congress, the post-Watergate Democrats were unusually active legislators. In the 94th Congress (1975–1976), more than a third of them floor-managed a major bill or amendment, and almost all first-term Democrats offered floor amendments (two-thirds successfully) as well as putting forth successful amendments in committees and subcommittees.<sup>16</sup> And seven in ten of them served on a conference committee, while a similar percentage gave a “major” floor speech.

Although comparative data for the large 1964 class are spotty, none floor-managed a major bill or amendment, and only 12% offered floor amendments. To be sure by 1975, the House had become a more accommodating place for new members, but the 1974 Democrats took full advantage of their opportunities. And this continued throughout their careers in the House, at least until, ironically, the Gingrich cohort helped Republicans take over the House, a domination that would remain for sixteen of the next 20 years. Thus, just when the remaining 1974

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Loomis, *The New American Politician* 49.

<sup>15</sup> Burdett Loomis, “Congressional Careers and Party Leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives,” *American Journal of Political Science* 28, (1984), 180–202.

<sup>16</sup> Loomis, *New American Politician* 40.

Democratic legislators were about to wield their greatest committee influence, they lost the chance to serve as chairs until 2007. By then, their ranks were to be considerably thinned.

Various studies of the 104th GOP House cohort show evidence of a class relatively legislatively accomplished because it maintained its collective identity with a bulldog grip through its first two congressional terms. Members of group stuck together so as to give House Speaker Gingrich and the Republican Whip system a bargaining tool both in the chamber and when dealing with Republicans in the Senate. It is widely recognized that while Newt Gingrich was House Speaker he frequently used the famed (but exaggerated) cohesion of the 104th cohort to claim impending calamities for legislative progress unless the demands of the 104th were addressed.<sup>17</sup>

By presenting the leadership's agenda as the class's agenda, then tutoring the class on what he hoped to accomplish, the Speaker was able move his policy goals forward more expeditiously than would have been the case absent a generally cooperative freshman class. In time, however, Gingrich would learn that class members had many of their own ideas and that they were less willing to be cowed or co-opted than he imagined.

Part of Gingrich's exaggerated confidence that he could lead the 104th freshmen derived from the ways he successfully cultivated, mentored, and encouraged the class, especially in the run-up to the historic 1994 election. Operating tactically for months prior the 1994 elections (and continuing his educative strategies thereafter), Gingrich flooded prospective members of the new Republican insurgency with cassette tapes, pamphlets, books, and memos that presented a unified vision and plan to his prospective troops.

On the other hand, by 2005–2006, the group's sixth congress, the class's influence had waned, especially in comparison to the 94th's ascendancy, not only because of less committee-based power, but also thanks to the shrinkage of the cohort to 23 members – less than one-third of their original size. Actually, based upon interviews with cohort members and their senior staffers in 1997 and thereafter, it appears that the class forfeited much of its sense of class identity beginning with the 106th Congress in 1999. What bound members together thereafter was not class organization but a sense of legislative learning acquired during the class's first two terms in office, as it became part of the party-dominated chamber under the influence of Minority Leader Tom DeLay and the party-based requirements of the so-called Hastert rule.

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<sup>17</sup> See Barnett, *Legislative Learning*.

## The Long Tail: How Large Partisan Congressional Classes Can Affect Policy and Politics over Time

Although reporters usually lose interest in large cohorts, and these cohorts gradually surrender their identity, this does not mean that such groups do not remain influential in many ways. For example, although the large Democratic cohort of 1964 was crucial to enacting many pieces of Great Society legislation, the substantial demise of their members in their initial bid for re-election also meant that they would wield less power as time went on, simply because of diminished numbers of members who could grasp the opportunities that opened up in the years/decades to come.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, one of their members, Washington state's Tom Foley, became chair of the Agriculture Committee in 1975, after only five terms in the House, when its chair was displaced by the Democratic Caucus vote at the start of the 94th Congress. He would later become Speaker, losing his seat in 1994 and thus becoming a part of three major upheavals in House membership. Foley's ascension illustrates how luck (in the form of the 1974 ouster of Agriculture Chair Poage), talent, and durability can shape congressional careers. By the time he became Speaker, Foley was rarely identified as part of the large 89th Congressional class, yet his experiences as a member of that group and the step up he received by surviving (in a tough district) the 1966 GOP backlash, gave him a considerable advantage early in his House tenure. And moving quickly into leadership allowed him to demonstrate his considerable political skills.

Thus, beyond a cohort's survival in raw numbers, the entrance of a large group allows a disproportionate number of them the opportunity to move into powerful positions within the chamber. It also, provides the opportunity for the cohort's members to run for higher office, most notably the US Senate. Although many members of the 1974 class failed here, a substantial number succeeded (see below), and in this way spread the overall influence of this group – albeit in far less ideological ways than that of other classes (e.g., the long-lasting the distinctive Senate careers of Montana's Max Baucus and Iowa's Tom Harkin).

In addition, given the relative youth the members of recent large cohorts, many of them used the Congress as a springboard to subsequent careers, where they could enrich themselves and/or continue to have an impact on public policy, even after an electoral defeat. For example, New York's Tom Downey, a poster

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boy for the youth of the Class of 1974, given that he began his service at age 25, lost his bid for reelection in 1992. Subsequently, he formed a major D.C. lobbying firm, with former Republican Representative Ray McGrath. The Downey/McGrath team certainly “did well,” in economic terms, but it also “did good” by taking on a number of pro bono clients (e.g., Cochlear Americas, which provided hearing surgeries), whom it helped to significant policy victories.

In short, while the immediate and mid-range impacts of large cohorts may be the most visible manifestations of their entry into Washington politics, a much fuller, long-term accounting is required in order to assess the overall impact of their presence.

## The First 20 Years of the 1974 and 1994 Cohorts

As the Watergate Babies (sic) and the Gingrich cohort reach the 40- and 20-year anniversaries of their initial sweeping victories, we can directly compare their first 20 years of experience. This is a limited perspective, to be sure, but it will provide some outlines of how large classes evolve in contemporary politics, realizing at the same time that every class’s context is different. We will briefly examine survival rates, attempts to advance (and successes), and post-congressional experiences for those who no longer remain in the House.

Almost by definition, large partisan classes are apt to lose a fair number of members early in their tenure. Many legislators have won marginal seats, or even those that favor the opposing party. Moreover, partisan sweeps may usher into office legislators who turn out not be especially skilled. The 1994 class had more than its share of the latter. Even as the GOP retained its House majority in the election of 1996, thirteen first-term members lost their seats, and two others left (see Table 2). In contrast, the Watergate babies lost only two members in 1976, which was a good Democratic year. But their ranks were reduced in 1978

**Table 2** Size of 1974 Democratic and 1994 Republican Partisan Cohorts\* during Their First Ten Congresses.

	Initial N	N after:	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992
1974 Dems	75		73	62	47	39	31	27	26	25	16
		N in:	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012
1994 GOP	73		58	50	42	32	30	23	14	10	7

\*For those with continuous service.

(six losing candidates) and especially 1980, when 12 members of the class lost their seats.

Overall, the ranks of the two large classes declined in roughly similar numbers over the course of their first 12 years see (Table 2). But the 1974 group remained more intact through the late 1980s, as their members moved into increasing positions of responsibility. The Republicans from the 1994 class, on the other hand, retired in greater numbers, often as a result of personal pledges to limit their terms. (See Table 3) No member of the '74 class made such a pledge.

What Table 2 omits, however, is that between losing elections and retirements in 1992 and 1994, the Democratic Class of 1974 dropped from 25 members in the 102nd Congress (1991–1992) to just eight in the 104th Congress (1995–1996). Although eight of the Watergate babies lost in 1992, the year of the banking scandal and reapportionment/redistricting, none were defeated in 1994. But, perhaps anticipating trouble, six retired. Only eight of their members remained to endure minority status for the first time in their careers. Of those eight in the subsequent 20 years, just two were defeated, while six retired, culminating with Waxman and Miller before the 2014 elections. Only those two, plus Minnesota’s Jim Oberstar, stayed in the House long enough to wield power as committee chairs in the 110th and 111th Congresses (2007–2011), with Oberstar losing his seat in a 2010 upset.

Looking at the exit paths for these two large classes, the similarities outweigh any differences, especially given the wave of Democratic retirements in the run-up to the 1994 elections. Indeed, there is some irony that so many remaining Democrats from the Class of 1974 decided to leave, just prior to the impressive entrance of the Gingrich cohort into the House. Taking into account the actions of members from both classes, after electoral defeat, the two major avenues for leaving the House are choosing retirement or seeking a Senate seat. Twenty-nine members from the two groups retired and twenty-nine sought a Senate seat,

**Table 3** Exiting the House: The First Twenty Years of the Partisan Classes of 1974 and 1994\*.

Left via:	Retirement	Lost Election		Sought Senate		Sought Gov.		Died
		Gen.	Primary	Won	Lost	Won	Lost	
1974 Democrats, (N=60)	10	26	6	6	9	2	0	1
1994 Republicans, (N=66)	19	24	3	5 <sup>#</sup>	9	1	3	2

\*Several members of the Class of 1994 returned to the House after defeat within the first 20 years.

<sup>#</sup>One senator was appointed.

eleven successfully. In a sense, both these choices involve “exit” in Hirschman’s terminology, albeit through different routes.<sup>19</sup>

Given that the average age of these classes is relatively low and that most members leave the House within a decade (61 of 148 total of the two classes remain into the sixth term), a substantial amount of a cohort’s impact may actually take place after its members exit the House. Although a (very) few members opt to run for governor, of those remaining in government, the largest group moves into the Senate. At the same time, most of those who retire or lose end up in the private sector, and here the differences between the two classes are substantial.

## Moving Up

One measure of the impact of any congressional cohort is the number of individuals who have successfully moved up the political ladder. The obvious two targets are the Senate and home-state governorships, although Cabinet positions and even the presidency are not beyond aspiration. Clearly, and unsurprisingly, the Senate is the preferred target, and, as noted, large numbers of legislators from both classes have sought Senate seats. Both classes have had their successes in seeking the Senate, although on balance the impact of the Class of 1994 Republicans has been greater.

Seven Class of 1994 MCs advanced to the upper chamber, with five (Brownback [KS], Chambliss[GA], Graham[SC], Burr[NC], and the appointed Wicker[MS]) coming directly from the House, while Ensign[NV] lost an initial Senate race in 2000 only to win in 2002, and Tom Coburn honored a term-limit pledge and left the House before moving up in 2004. The overall impact of these members has been modest, although Chambliss, Graham, and Burr continue to serve, and Brownback, after an abortive presidential bid in 2008, returned to Kansas and won its governorship, perhaps as a means of building a base for another presidential run. Overall, they fit with Sean Theriault’s depiction of the “Gingrich senators,” who entered the upper chamber from the House, bringing with them a partisan approach to legislative politics.<sup>20</sup>

Within the Democrats’ Class of 1994, six MC’s won election to the Senate – Baucus[MT], Dodd [CN], Harkin[IA], Simon[IL], Tsongas[MA], and Wirth[CO], while Texas’s Bob Krueger was appointed. The numbers for the two classes are identical – six elected and one appointed senator, but the 1994 group, with three

<sup>19</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> Sean Theriault, *The Gingrich Senators* (New York: Oxford, 2013).

significant committee chairs (Baucus, Dodd, and Harkin) and two presidential candidates (Tsongas and Simon), appears, as of 2014, to have had collectively a greater impact, especially if Vermont's Patrick Leahy, veteran Judiciary chair and first elected in 1974, is added to the mix.

Perhaps most significantly in terms of impact, the Watergate Class produced three Senate committee chairs (four with Leahy) in the 111th Congress (2009–2010): Baucus on Finance with intense healthcare negotiations; Dodd on Banking and the Dodd-Frank regulatory legislation; and Harkin on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Along with the three House committee chairs – Waxman on Energy and Commerce, Miller on Education and Labor, and Oberstar on Transportation – there was very little domestic legislation not touched upon by these surviving members. Thirty-five years after entering the House, the diversity in ideology and in policy interests among the class remained evident, with the committee chairs as a group definitely tilted in a more liberal direction than the original House class.

Aside from Brownback, two other 1994 GOP entrants served as governor: Maryland's Bob Erlich, who won his first of two terms in 2002, and South Carolina's Mark Sanford, who likewise won in 2002 and served two terms.<sup>21</sup> And just two Democrats from the 1974 groups – Michigan's Jim Blanchard and New Jersey's Jim Florio – won governorships. Without question, most the classes' ambitions focused on the Senate, not the statehouse. After retirement and legislative defeat, losing a bid for the Senate stands as the most common route to exiting the House.

For many of the policy entrepreneurs in the Class of 1974, the Senate appeared as a bright opportunity, even when held by Republicans in the 1981–1987 period. As Illinois Senator Paul Simon put it after winning election to the Senate in 1984, “I love it. I'm on a five-person subcommittee, and if I can get one Republican to go along with my Democratic colleague and me, we can move a piece of legislation to the full committee.” After a decade in the far more restrictive House, even after the reforms of the 1970s, the Senate looked like a toy-store to the policy-oriented Simon.

## Moving Out

In the end, everyone does leave the House, although relatively few leave “first,” in contrast to earlier generations. What that means, conversely, is that

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<sup>21</sup> Among a host of scandal-plagued members of both classes (see below), Sanford may stand out as the strangest case, given the public playing out of his philandering, even after he returned to the House in 2013.

former legislators have the opportunity to remain active in politics long after they have exited the House (or Senate). This paper can just skim the surface of these post-Capitol Hill activities, but one clear difference between the two classes does emerge: more 1974 Democrats ultimately became lobbyists than did their 1994 counterparts, who were more likely to move into media roles.

The best example of the 1974 lobbyists is probably Marty Russo, who lost his 1992 bid for reelection and seamlessly became a major D.C. lobbyist, rising to become CEO of Cassiday and Associates, the leading practitioner of so-called “earmark lobbying.”<sup>22</sup> At least a third of former 1974 class members have engaged in lobbying or the typical D.C. combination of law and lobbying, reflecting broad trends in revolving door politics and the rise of insider-based lobbying.<sup>23</sup>

That contrasts sharply with the 1994 entrants, although a few have become prominent lobbyists, including J.C. Watts and Steve Largent (coincidentally both former star football players). Rather, the 1994 cohort has produced a number of prominent media figures, most notably Joe Scarborough, the principal on MSNBC’s long-running *Morning Joe* show. Perhaps as much as any of his colleagues, Scarborough has embraced Newt Gingrich’s public style, balancing political commentary, showmanship, and good humor to emerge as an influential voice, not only on the right but also across the political spectrum.

In his under-appreciated book, *Capitol Investments*, Glenn Parker argues that, aside from the conventional motives that we ascribe to MCs in office, they also knowingly prepare themselves for post-Congress employment. Drawing on a human capital model, Parker states, “rational politicians obtain material benefits but do not do so through any devious manipulation of policies or office prerogatives.... [P]oliticians anticipate the returns that can be obtained through on-the-job investments in human capital and accordingly adjust their activities in office....[L]egislators profit from the skills they have acquired, the contacts they have made, and more generally the human capital they have acquired.”<sup>24</sup>

Former Representatives Russo and Scarborough offer apt illustrations of Parker’s thesis. Russo, as a Chicago-based insider with a gregarious personality, could move easily into the world of high-powered lobbying from his seat on the Ways and Means Committee, which he occupied for 14 years. Scarborough, on the other hand, voluntarily resigned from the Congress in 2001, in his fourth term,

<sup>22</sup> See Robert Kaiser, *So Damned Much Money* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See, among others, Timothy M. LaPira, Herschel F. Thomas III and Frank Baumgartner, “The Two Worlds of Lobbying: Washington Lobbyists in the Core and on the Periphery,” *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 3, no. 3 (October) (2014) 210–45.

<sup>24</sup> Glenn Parker, *Capitol Investments: The Marketability of Political Skills* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 4.

and quickly used his personality and media savvy to become a broadcast personality and analyst. Russo certainly would have been happy to stay in the House, at least as long as Democrats held a majority, but for Scarborough the long slog through the House hierarchy held few attractions.

By and large, the Class of 1974 members were more likely to stay in Washington than were those who entered in 1994. The Watergate babies grew up with a Washington that they helped to create and that they felt comfortable with. Several in the Gingrich cohort limited themselves to three terms, and left. Others were never socialized into the Washington scene, with some never establishing a D.C. residence. Still, one size does not fit all, and some individuals from both classes would be able to navigate the D.C. waters in any weather.

Take, for example, former Representatives Norm Mineta (D-CA) and Ray LaHood (R-IL), both of whom ended up serving in the cabinet of a president from the opposing party – Mineta as Secretary of Transportation for George W. Bush, and LaHood in the same job for Barack Obama. With their muted ideologies, warm personalities, and willingness to reach across the aisle, they would have been perfect candidates for such jobs in any era. While Mineta was not out of the mainstream of the 1974 class, LaHood was clearly more moderate than his colleagues, and the ones who followed him into the House. The fact that he accepted an Obama appointment sets him apart from almost all contemporary GOP House members.

The range of successful post-Congress careers is great for both classes, but the 1974 group again is especially noteworthy. Paul Simon wrote twenty-plus books and started a major policy institute at Southern Illinois University. Bob Edgar, a minister, became head of Common Cause. Tim Wirth served as an ambassador. Bob Carr and Rick Nolan returned to the House, with Nolan's 30-year hiatus representing a congressional record.

The classes did not socialize all their members in similar ways, but the combination of entering in a wave, helping to change the House in ways the new members desired, and obtaining a set of skills relevant to both legislative and post-legislative work provides useful ways to think about how a single electoral event can produce changes that reverberate over decades. At the same time, some mention is merited of the number of scandals that members of both these groups brought upon themselves. About 10% of each group was tarnished by a significant public scandal, often leading to defeat at the polls. And this does not even count the “victims” of the 1992 House bank scandal, in which many members regularly wrote bad checks on their official accounts with the payroll office.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gary C. Jacobson and Michael Dimick, “Checking Out: The Effects of Overdrafts on the 1992 Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 3 (August), (1994), 601–24.

Both sexual (1974: Jenrette, Richmond; 1994: Foley) and financial scandals seemed commonplace, although any large group is likely to attract attention with its problems. Still, for all our notion of legislative learning/socialization in various dimensions (learning to legislate, learning to govern, developing skills, and – at least for the 1974 group – learning some norms), a lot of these legislators pushed past the bounds of propriety and, sometimes, legality. Large classes and favorable political situations for one party may attract a disproportionate number of candidates who would not run – or win – in regular electoral contexts. On the other hand, having a John (and Rita) Jenrette and a Freddie Richmond in your class will mean that things will rarely be boring.

## Large Classes: Important, to a Point

With their very numbers and sometimes historical significance, large congressional cohorts can have – or seem to have – disproportionate impact on the institution, its politics, and its policies. Moreover, these classes feed large numbers of individuals into the first rungs of significant national politics, where they may move in many directions, especially after leaving the House. At the same time, looking over the classes of 1974 Democrats and 1994 Republicans, we were struck by how many members came on stage as essentially political extras, only to vanish from public view. For many members of these groups, their greatest impact came with the votes they cast, alongside their fellow classmates, as they either tormented or supported their leaders – or some of both.

To a certain extent, these large classes are never more important than in their first few days. The very fact that they have entered the House and have profoundly changed the balance of power, either between the parties or within them, is enough. Gingrich's turbulent group worked together to a point, but their existence as part of the GOP takeover might well have been their most significant contribution. On the other hand, while the Watergate babies came in with a bang and immediately affected how the House was run, their long-term effects over 40 years have been substantial, as they moved the chamber first to a highly decentralized body, but then helped generate an increasingly powerful party system.

The best of those legislators, such as a Henry Waxman or a George Miller in different ways, could negotiate paths between the committees and the leadership. As new cohorts develop in a highly partisan Congress, such skills, while highly useful, may be in short supply. So as the Class of 1974 leaves the stage, and the 1994 cohort shrinks toward being a pool of water on the floor, we may first want to look back and more rigorously assess their impacts, and second we

might look ahead and assess the emerging impact of the “Tea Party” Republican Class of 2010.

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