

# [***Congressional Brain Drain Is No Laughing Matter | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BPW-DNG1-JBR6-90KW-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** We're giving current and potential candidates for office every reason imaginable to consider other professional paths.

**Body**

Would you call an organization that has seen more than 50 percent turnover in upper management over less than six years a mess? I would, and so did a bipartisan group of almost 300 former members of [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) who, when asked in a [*recent survey*](https://www.usafmc.org/survey-results) to attach adjectives to the current Congress, landed on the following top five words: dysfunctional, partisan, polarized, divided, mess.

Since 2019, almost 250 members of Congress were replaced, either through retirement or election loss, and that number will obviously rise by the time the 119th Congress is sworn in. [*Already, more than 50*](https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/casualty-list)representatives and senators have announced that they are retiring or seeking other offices. That's experienced upper management and decades of institutional knowledge walking out the door.

The numbers are even worse at the staff level, where average tenure right now is less than 5 years. According to LegiStorm, which tracks congressional staff rosters and salaries, [*55 percent more*](https://www.legistorm.com/pro_news/3147/despite-improvement-house-staff-turnover-remains-near-decade-high-levels.html) House staff members left their jobs in 2021 than in the preceding year. Does the date Jan. 6, 2021, ring a bell?

We're giving current and potential candidates for office every reason imaginable to consider other professional paths. Salaries for current members of Congress have remained unchanged for almost two decades. When one accounts for inflation, salaries have actually decreased 29 percent, [*according to a report by the Congressional Research Service*](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/97-1011/89).

Additionally, life in Congress is a challenging public service performed by the whole family. Members miss family events, baseball games, or ballet recitals. Spouses become single parents for most of the year, especially when the congressional District requires lengthy travel to and from Washington. And kids see their parent demonized on social media, where increasingly what starts as a string of nasty online posts turns into something much more nefarious: calls for violence.

Along those lines, in the same poll mentioned above, nearly half of former members and their families received threats while serving in Congress. That number rose significantly if the member was a woman and/or a minority. A third of those polled also reported threats to their staff.

In 2023, [*Capitol Police opened over 8,000 threat assessment cases*](https://www.uscp.gov/media-center/press-releases/uscp-threat-assessment-cases-2023)based on complaints filed by members, their families, and their staffs. That's an increase of about [*400 percent over the past six years*](https://rollcall.com/2023/04/25/were-canceling-days-off-capitol-police-chief-pleads-for-more-funding/)—while at the same time, [*almost 400 officers have left the Department since Jan. 6, 2021.*](https://www.rules.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Manger2.pdf)

But when you ask recently retired members of Congress why they left Capitol Hill, the answer isn't low pay, long hours, or even fear of violence. More often than not the answer is hyper-partisanship and the inability to actually address our nation's most pressing issues.

The current dysfunction on daily display in the House—and to a lesser degree the Senate—has resulted in a toxic workplace that is simply no longer worth the sacrifice. How many of us want to come to work every day at an organization defined by name-calling, bullying, backstabbing, procedural tactics employed for the sole purpose of punishing a colleague, and even physical altercations? Members and staff are headed for the exits, because in a legislative branch defined by chaos, actual legislating is neither possible nor prioritized. Those members who define their accomplishments through social media hits and soundbites on cable news, rather than solving the very real pain that is being felt in communities across the country, gleefully point to congressional brain drain as another measure of success.

Our democracy is based on three co-equal branches of government, but a dysfunctional Congress that struggles to fulfill even its most basic constitutional mandates creates a void. When asked whether Congress had ceded to the executive branch powers meant for the legislative branch, 80 percent of former members of Congress agreed—another bipartisan finding. Successful legislating requires skills earned through time and experience: building relationships, creating coalitions, leadership based on integrity and credibility, and an understanding of the arcane legislative process.

To achieve this, we must enact reforms that empower members who prioritize legislating over self-aggrandizing, as well as provide support to new members who want to change Congress for the better. Work that is being done, for example, by the House Administration Subcommittee on Modernization of Congress. As with every organization with significant turnover and a culture of dysfunction, unwinding the underlying problems is a difficult process that requires bold action, sustained commitment, and buy-in of those on the inside. And, more importantly, voters need to incentivize pragmatic legislators rather than those cheering institutional knowledge heading for the exit.

*Peter M. Weichlein has been the CEO of FMC (The Association of Former Members of Congress) for over 20 years, and previously worked on the Hill on bankruptcy reform and on the impeachment trial of former President Bill Clinton. He is also a licensed attorney and a freelance writer, focusing on* ***politics*** *and civics.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2372530/sunrise-united-states-capitol.jpg)

**Graphic**

Sunrise at the United States Capitol

ALLISON BAILEY/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images

Sunrise at the United States Capitol on a spring morning, Washington, D.C., on March 26, 2024.

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