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More House Republicans are leaving Congress to run for governor than in decades amid frustration over 'toxic environment'

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Rep. Tom Tiffany cheers as Donald Trump is announced as the winner of Wisconsin's Electoral ...



Congressional Republicans have yet to break the record for most retirements in a

single year, but some say it's only a matter of time before widespread frustration with the current state of Washington leads to a tipping point as many in the party head for the exits.

The 10 House Republicans seeking gubernatorial offices in their states this election cycle is the most who have run from either party in the available data compiled by CNN dating back to 1974. From Arizona to Florida to South Carolina, an increasing number of GOP lawmakers feel like they can better implement President Donald Trump's agenda at the state level than as part of a narrow majority in Congress.

"I just think that I'll have more impact as a chief executive versus being a legislator," Rep. Tom Tiffany, who is running for governor of Wisconsin, told CNN. "The basic question is where can I do the most good for the people in the state of Wisconsin? And I believe that it is as governor."

While most Republicans departing Congress leave behind them safe seats that will be easy for their party to fill, the departures underscore the broader discontent that members say comes with the job – from gridlock that makes it difficult to pass legislation to security threats they and their families face from being in the public eye.

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Rep. Michael McCaul — who is retiring after two decades in the House, where he has served as chairman of the Homeland Security and Foreign Affairs Committees — told CNN that Congress has changed for the worse over his tenure.

"The level of partisanship, rancor, vitriolic debate, demonizing the other side of the aisle, not willing to work across the aisle to get good things done for the American people, and just the overall toxic environment. And then we are chained to the floor here on votes that will never become law in a lot of cases," the Texas Republican said.



Rep. Michael McCaul speaks at a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on Capitol Hill on December 3, 2025 in Washington, DC. (*Andrew Harnik/Getty Images/File*)

Another GOP lawmaker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak freely, went even further to describe how the dysfunction of Washington makes it impossible to get simple things accomplished.

"It's historic to be there. It's an amazing honor. But boy, they suck a lot of the life out of you sometimes," the lawmaker said. "For some people, it's like, what am I doing this for?"

Exits by the numbers

The GOP started the year with momentum after Trump won the White House and the party took control of both chambers of Congress. Over the summer, Republicans came together to enact a sweeping agenda bill, securing a signature legislative achievement for the president.

But as the year comes to a close, many Republicans are not seeking re-election in Washington. And while the GOP controls both chambers of Congress now, some within the party are worried that might not be the case after the 2026 midterm elections.

See how 2026 congressional retirements compare to previous election cycles

Fifty-three members have said they are not running for re-election in the 2026 midterms, closing in on the number of retirements for the 2018, 2022 and 2024 cycles.

House and Senate members not running for re-election, by election year

2026	30	23
2024	23	31
2022	25	30
2020	30	10
2018	37	18
2016	27	19
2014	28	20
2012	21	27
2010	21	23
2008	29	3
2006	18	11
2004	20	17
2002	27	14
2000	24	11
1998	18	20
1996	26	36
1994	23	34
1992	27	45
1990	20	10
1988	16	13
1986	23	23
1984	15	11
1982	23	20
1980	16	23
1978	23	35
1976	20	35

Note: Data as of Dec. 23 and does not include members who died or resigned before the end of their particular Congress, except Sen. Frank Murkowski, who won the governorship in Alaska in 2002 and resigned two years before his term was up. Count for 2012 includes Sen. Joe Lieberman, an independent who caucused with the Democrats. Count for 2024 includes Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin, who were independents and caucused with Democrats.

Still, House Speaker Mike Johnson is confident that his party will hold onto the lower chamber in next year's midterms.

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"I'm very, very bullish about the midterms. I know that we are going to win because we have a great record to run on," the Louisiana Republican said on December 11.

Asked what's leading Republicans to retire from Congress, Johnson said on December 3, "These are not easy times. There are a lot of challenges for the country. And we're doing it in an environment, where you have one of the smallest margins possible, smallest margins in history. And so, it creates frictions sometimes, and everybody has different ideas, and as I say every day, I'm in the consensus building business."

"Everybody's not delighted with every decision every day. But that's, that's Congress. That's the way the system works," he added.

Spike in governor bids

At least 14 lawmakers so far, the majority of whom are Republican, have launched bids for governors' mansions in 2026.

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Eleven House lawmakers – 10 Republicans and one Democrat – are currently running for governor, surpassing the previous record of nine lawmakers in 2018.

GOP House members make a play for governors' offices in 2026

Ten Republican members are seeking gubernatorial offices in their states this election cycle — the most who have run from either party in the available data compiled by CNN dating back to 1974.

House members running for gubernatorial seats, by election year

2026	10	1
2024	1	1
2022	1	3
2020	1	
2018	5	4
2016	1	
2014	2	
2012	1	
2010	4	1
2008	2	
2006	7	2
2004	1	
2002	3	4
2000	3	1
1998	2	1
1996	1	
1994	4	1
1992	1	1
1990	2	5
1988	1	1
1986	3	
1984	2	
1982	2	3
1980	1	
1978	3	
1976	1	
1974	2	6

Note: 2026 candidates as of December 23. Data does not include members who ran for governor in states with off-year gubernatorial elections (VA, KY, NJ, LA and MS).

Source: Data gathered by CNN and CNN analysis of CQ Roll Call data

Graphic: Alex Leeds Matthews, CNN

Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York also announced plans to run for governor this year, but her run was short-lived: she suspended her campaign in late December and said she would not run for reelection to the House.

This year, three senators have announced they are running for governor – with two taking the unusual step of potentially leaving their Senate terms early for a chance at winning the governor's mansion in their home states.

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More are expected to put their hats in the ring. The field is so crowded that in two states – South Carolina and Arizona – two GOP lawmakers are running against each other for governor.

The allure of the governor's mansion

Many say their decisions to leave Congress are unique or the result of opportunities arising in their states. But frequent partisan stalemate in Washington this term has contributed to the allure of becoming a state executive, particularly in states that are considered Republican strongholds.

Sen. Tommy Tuberville has decided that he could be more effective implementing Trump's agenda by returning to his home state of Alabama.

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"You don't make a lot of decisions here," Tuberville said of the Senate in an interview with CNN. "You might vote one way or the other, and might come up with a bill or two, but in state government you can build."

Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina, who is running for governor, has painted House GOP leaders as **ineffective**, and argued that they're marginalizing rank-and-file members and women. Mace warned in a recent New York Times op-ed that without action, her party will lose control of Washington.



Rep. Nancy Mace arrives for a House Republican conference meeting at the US Capitol on November 19, 2024. (Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images/File)

Rep. Dusty Johnson, who is running for governor in South Dakota, told CNN he doesn't view his decision to leave as running away from the dysfunction in

Washington; but rather as running toward an opportunity in his home state that is predominantly Republican.

"I don't think governing in a one-party environment is necessarily easier," Johnson said of governing in South Dakota. "I think we have seen that in modern politics, there isn't a single Republican Party or a single Democratic Party, and indeed the in-fighting within a party can be every bit as intense some days as fighting between the parties."

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Still, one GOP lawmaker, granted anonymity to speak freely, argued that the appeal of running for governor comes down to this mindset: "I can be one of 435 or one of one."

It's a calculation that many are weighing.



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