



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on September 1, 2026

Record House Retirements Signal Deep Institutional Decay

An unusual number of House members is heading for the exit ahead of the 2026 midterms — a warning sign, regardless of party, about the state of Congress as an institution. So far, 37 House Republicans have announced they won't seek reelection, exceeding the previous record of 34 set during the 2018 "blue wave" cycle, while 23 House Democrats have made the same call, bringing the combined total to 60 and making this the second-largest retirement wave in modern congressional history, trailing only 1992.



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Multiple Motivations

The reasons cited range from the mundane to the alarming. Some retirees point to standard factors — family commitments, a desire to make room for new leadership, or moves toward higher office. Three sitting senators, for instance, are leaving Washington to run for governor.

But many are naming something deeper. Multiple retiring lawmakers, in interviews reviewed by Brookings, described their work environment as a "toxic partisan atmosphere," while others cited sheer exhaustion with endless reelection cycles and legislative gridlock that leaves little to show for the effort. *The New York Times* flagged the rise of political violence directed at members as a distinct factor pushing lawmakers away from public service altogether — a genuinely troubling data point for anyone concerned with the health of representative government.

Bipartisan Departures

The list of departures is politically notable in its own right. Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) is retiring after nearly four decades in office. On the Republican side, retirements include several members who have publicly clashed with the administration's approach to executive power, alongside a headline-grabbing early resignation by Georgia Republican Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who isn't included among the official 37 retiring but is in addition to it. In other words, the exodus cuts across the ideological map.

For an institution built on the constitutional premise of accountable, citizen-rooted representation, a retirement wave this size, driven substantially by burnout, toxicity, and fear rather than natural political transition, deserves more scrutiny than it's getting. Midterm elections are historically difficult for the party holding the White House, and a lopsided ratio of departing Republicans to Democrats (37 to 23) offers Speaker Mike Johnson a genuine challenge in defending an already-thin majority.

Difficult to Serve

But the more fundamental story here isn't which party benefits from the churn; it's what it says about



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the incentives and pressures now facing anyone willing to serve. Whatever the makeup of the 120th Congress that convenes in January, it will do so with an unusually large share of institutional memory walking out the door, and an unusually clear signal that the job itself has become one many capable people no longer want.

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