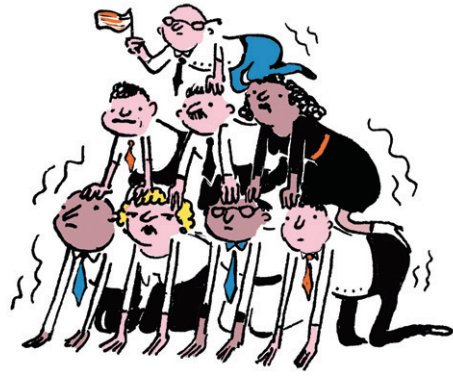


Quitting Congress: The Exit Interviews

Even the insiders are fed up with Washington. This year, eight senators and 44 representatives are not running for re-election. To understand why, Times Opinion put the same eight questions to 12 members of Congress representing both parties. They explained why they believe the legislative branch is broken, described their accomplishments and frustrations and spoke frankly about salary pressures. And: identified their favorite perks of elected office.



What's one word you would use to describe Congress today?

"Broken."

Senator Thomas R. Carper (D-Del., retiring in January 2025 after serving 24 years)

"Dysfunctional."

Representative Grace F. Napolitano (D-Calif., 26 years)

"Dysfunctional."

Representative Anna Eshoo (D-Calif., 32 years)

"Misunderstood. The misunderstanding is that people are purposefully trying to not accomplish goals on behalf of the American people. That's just not true."

Representative Larry Bucshon (R-Ind., 14 years)

"Tense."

Representative John Sarbanes (D-Md., 18 years)

"It's just very challenging."

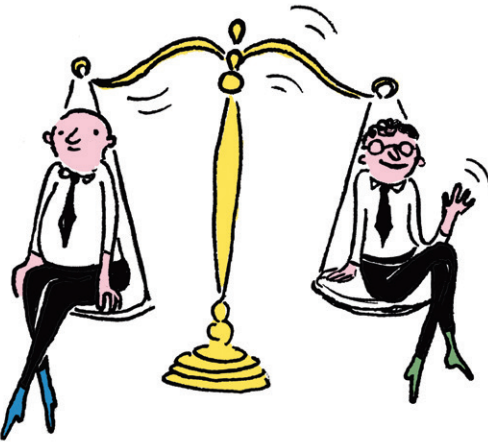
Representative Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore., 29 years)

"Difficult. Last year, when the Republicans took over the House of Representatives, they passed 27 bills, which made us the most unproductive Congress in any given year in United States history."

Representative Tony Cárdenas (D-Calif., 12 years)

"Potential. The institution right now is punching below its weight."

Representative Derek Kilmer (D-Wash., 12 years)



Is Congress corrupt?

"No, I don't see the corruption."

Representative Doug Lamborn (R-Colo., 18 years)

"Both Democrats and Republicans, by and large, they're just trying to do what we believe we need to do for our districts and for our constituents."

Representative Cárdenas

"I was told at the beginning that I had to raise \$250,000 if I wanted to be on certain committees. And if I wanted to be on more important committees or committees with broader jurisdiction, I needed to raise even more money. Buying a committee seat is not something that most Americans know that members of Congress have to do."

Representative Ken Buck (R-Colo., 10 years)

"The number of times over the course of the 11-plus years that I've heard one of my colleagues say, 'I agree with you on that but I could never vote that way because of my fear of a primary' is concerning."

Representative Kilmer



What was your most frustrating experience?

"I'd have to go through a laundry list of a few hundred. One was the antitrust legislation concerning big tech. They have so much money and so much influence or the Hill that we just can't move forward on those issues. And then the frustration of being in the House and being told all the time, 'This is how you need to vote.' The part of me that wanted to stick around because I believed we could get more things done died."

Representative Buck

"We were at a budget standoff over the debt ceiling. And Speaker Kevin McCarthy and President Biden negotiated a budget agreement. Then Speaker McCarthy walked away from that agreement. I've had lots of disagreements with people. But the thing that's most frustrating now is that the environment seems to

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give permission for people to come to an understanding, to shake hands, and then erase all memory of that deal when it becomes convenient to do so."

Representative Dan Kildee (D-Mich., 12 years)

"I think the most frustrating thing is when you have 300 co-sponsors to a bill, and you still can't get that across the finish line."

Representative Bucshon



What's the best perk of the job?

"The most amazing part about my job as a United States congressman is every time I'm driving up to the Capitol and I see that beautiful, iconic dome."

Representative Cárdenas

"To me, the best part of this job is the fact of who you get to be with every day."

Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md., 20 years in the House, 18 years in the Senate)

"The first time I went to the White House and met the president of the United States, I was really over the moon."

Representative Eshoo

"You get to go on some congressional trips. When you're sitting across from the prime minister of Japan, that's pretty cool."

Representative Bucshon

"The coolest thing about this job is that I have the same job as John Lewis. And when John was dying, he picked me — little Dan Kildee from West Genesee Street in Flint, Mich. — to cast his vote for him. That's not a perk, that's a privilege. And if it were just for the fact that I'll go for the rest of my life having become a friend of, and a partner to, John Lewis, it will have been worth all the stuff that we have to deal with here. Didn't want to use a more colorful word in that context, but I could have."

Representative Kildee

"The House gym is great."

Representative Buck

"The House gym. It's only about a C+ Y.M.C.A., but it is 100 feet from your office."

Representative Blumenauer



Did you make a difference?

"Most definitely. Over three decades, I've served with five presidents, and 66 bills signed into law. So I really reject the notion that you can't get things done."

Representative Eshoo

"I was responsible for passage of cancer screening coverage under Medicare."

Senator Cardin

"Help write a bipartisan infrastructure bill that has the biggest investment ever in climate provisions."

Senator Carper

"Permit the Smithsonian to build a Latino museum."

Representative Cárdenas

"Expanding rural broadband."

Representative Kilmer

"Managed to bring mental health into the light."

Representative Napolitano



What should a congressperson's salary be?

"If I go back to my district, where the average salary in some places is \$32,000, and I say, 'I don't make

enough' when I make \$174,000, they would go ballistic. I'd be out of office in a heartbeat. And yet, trying to maintain two places to live, have clothes in two places, have a car in two places, it's very difficult."

Representative Buck

"When I got to Congress, I realized, holy smokes, that comes out of my pocket without reimbursement. I've had a roommate every time I've rented an apartment."

Representative Cárdenas

"Do you want it to still be the House of the people? Or do you want it to be only wealthy people? I think it's important to have cost of living adjustments."

Representative Eshoo

"All of us ought to be concerned about the future in terms of who can afford to do this."

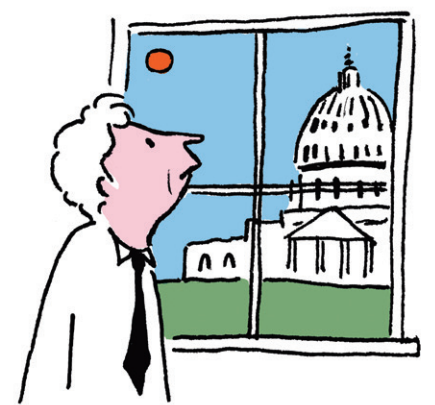
Representative Blumenauer

"I think it should at least keep up with inflation."

Representative Lamborn

"Congress works better when you have a broad swath of the American people being able to run and get elected. I really believe that."

Representative Bucshon



What worries you the most about the future?

"I worry about the future of our democracy."

Senator Carper

"You know, I saw it pretty up close and personally on the 6th of January, how fragile it is."

Representative Kilmer

"What worries me most is I'm not giving my grandkids the same country that my parents gave me. Social Security will be bankrupt within a few years — Medicare, the same way. We can't sustain \$34 trillion of debt. Right now, the incentive is to spend all the money that we don't have and to put the burden on our grandchildren because I get to go back to my district and tell people in my district, I got that bridge for you, we improved this interstate highway. We have no spending discipline."

Representative Buck

"A lot of the concerns I have now are about the geopolitical climate around the world."

Representative Bucshon

"Those autocratic regimes around the world."

Senator Cardin



How do you fix Congress?

"You'd have to change culture. You have to fix it at the root."

Representative Lamborn

"Well, it's the American people that have to fix the Congress."

Representative Eshoo

"Well, I think the American people are going to have to fix it."

Representative Bucshon

"One of my very close friends, who's also leaving Congress, Derek Kilmer, came up with some really thoughtful structural system changes."

Representative Kildee

"When I became a member of Congress, I was conscious of the fact that I was joining an organization that, according to recent polling, is less popular than head lice, colonoscopies and the rock band Nickelback. Every time there's a government shutdown, the floor of the house resembles 'The Jerry Springer Show.' It's fair for the American public to say, 'What's going on there?' That is a motivation for some of the structural changes that the Modernization Committee, which I chaired, went after. I also think that there are other structural changes related to strengthening the institution and democracy that Congress should take up."

Representative Kilmer