

Term Limits are Limiting

Our great Democracy was founded on the principals of being of the people, for the people and by the people. It is with these notions in mind that our Founding Fathers, much like todays constituencies, argued the notion of term limits for congressional members extensively. They arrived at the conclusion that term limits should not be applied to the Congressional Branch within the Constitution. Likewise I assert that, today, amending the Constitution to provide term limits for members of Congress in both houses would do more harm than good by limiting specialization, creating lame ducks and allowing lobbyists more influence in our political system.

A long tenure in Congress allows Senators and Representatives to develop the skills and perspectives necessary to create, analyze, rebuff and eventually pass laws essential to our nation's security, prosperity and continued freedoms. Our government was decidedly structured to make it difficult to get anything done. Instituting term limits would effectually limit our congressional member's ability to perform the duties for which they were elected by increasing turnover costs and creating a constant learning curve for new members. It is precisely because of this learning curve that important committee and leadership positions within Congress are typically held by senior members that have served many terms. Senator Max Baucus, for example, has been consistently re-elected in Montana since 1978 and currently serves as chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance. Specialization and the capacity to enact legislation comes with practice and adaptation, both of which are lost with term limits employed. "When a crisis comes," argues Representative Hyde, former chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, "you want people who have been tested—and you don't get them out of a phone book." Term limits would replace experienced Congressmen with "citizen legislators" that are largely uninformed of the political processes necessary to accomplish change within our system.

At the Constitutional Convention of 1787 James Madison recorded Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman as saying, "Frequent elections are necessary to preserve the good behavior of rulers. They also tend to give permanency to the government, by preserving that good behavior, because it ensures their re-election." With term limits imposed a congressional member has no advantage to 'behave well' in their final term, effectively creating lame duck members of Congress. An elected official's responsibility is to their constituency who vote them in and out of office. In effect, elections are already term limits but term limits without the possibility of inducing complacency in the elected; which hardly makes a Constitutional amendment necessary. If a state or district is satisfied enough with their Congressmen to re-elect them then they should be able to so do until they are dis-satisfied enough to vote them out.

Proponents of term limits argue that long serving congressional members develop persuasive funding from lobbyists and special interest groups, allowing lobbyists to be a primary influence on legislation. The flaw in this logic is the assumption that term limits would fix the hypothesized problem. With term limits in effect new and inexperienced congressional members could easily be swayed by seasoned lobbyists. Term limits would shift the power of Congress from elected legislators directly to career bureaucrats, unelected congressional staffers and the corporate lobbyists themselves.

The real elephant in the term limit room is voter education and engagement. The American public uses the lack of Congressional term limits as a scapegoat for shirking our responsibility to be informed citizens. Our history as a nation has shown us that not every law or lawmaker quite gets it right the first time and that it is the public's duty to keep our legislators accountable. Natural Selection is the process that drives evolution by adapting a species with favorable traits through time. Like nature evolves from generation to generation, by not enacting term limits through a constitutional amendment we can allow our legislators to evolve from term to term and in the process encourage constituencies to naturally select their own legislators by voting. The system isn't perfect, but practice sure helps and term limits will limit that capacity.

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