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Term Limits in the United States

by Amanda Manton

(Honors English 1102)

In recent years, term limits for the state and federal government, such as the United States Congress and state legislatures, have been an issue discussed and contemplated about in the United States. Mostly, the Republican Party pushes for term limits to correct issues involving the processes of government while the Democratic Party opposes term limits because they view them as ineffective to solve problems in the government. The only way that there will ever be term limits for the U.S. Congress is if an amendment is passed, such as the 22nd amendment that limits the president to two terms; for an amendment to be passed, both parts of Congress need to have a two-thirds majority vote and three-fourths of the states need to ratify the amendment (Maddock). Although amendments are possible to pass, it takes a great deal of effort and cooperation among political officials to pass.

According to Preston Maddock from *The Huffington Post*, in April 2013, Arizona Republican Representative Matt Salmon proposed a bill named Joint Resolution 41, which would limit House of Representatives to three terms and Senators to two terms. This would ensure that the politicians are more aware of their constituents' environment. This shows that term limits are still relevant today and is not just a new idea. On the other hand, there have been Congress members that have been adamant against term limits for politicians, from local levels all the way up to the President. For instance, ever since 1997, New York Democratic Representative Jose Serrano has tried to repeal the 22nd amendment, but all of his attempts have died before reaching a vote in the House of Representatives. Regardless, both sides of the debate want to improve the government but, use term limits for different justifications.

Reasons Supporting Term Limits

The proponents of term limits often try to look back at history to defend their push for term limits. For instance, many, such as Jed Babbin from the political journal, *American Spectator*, state that the Founding Fathers supported term limits and shaped the foundation of our government to favor term limits because none of them were politicians for their whole careers (30). The Founding Fathers also specifically stated that the government needed a constant “rotation of office,” so that the politicians would not be a permanent fixture in one area of government and could move to other areas of government if they wanted to continue in politics (“Arguments”). The cycling of politicians in a certain office benefits that position by getting a different point of view from the next official. This helps other areas of government too because they will gain the experience and knowledge of the former officials if they win a different position in one of the other areas of government. Proponents of term limits use the Founding Fathers as an example because they believe that the country should value the tradition and legacy they set for the government.

Supporters of term limits also state that term limits will limit the amount of corruption in politics. According to Restart Congress, a political movement that advocates for term limits, they will weaken the influence of lobbyists and special interest groups because Congress members “will have less time to develop financially beneficial commitments” (“Arguments”). This will limit corruption because the politicians will be forced to make decisions based on what is best for their constituents instead of trying to line their pockets with money to finance their next election. Additionally, term limits will cause Congress committee members to be chosen based on merit rather

than be based on “political favors” and a greed for power in Congress and seniority (“Arguments”). The reason that the members will be based on merit is because there will be less career politicians, so each member of Congress has more equal seniority and weaker political alliances.

Similarly, much of the corruption in Congress is due to the career politicians. According to Babbitt, the more time a person stays in office, the more likely they will become corrupted because their experience brings a sense of power and seniority (30). Also, with that, the more likely the members will try to use their position to gain favors and bribes from lobbyists and groups that want to speak with them (Babbitt 28). The members believe that they can use their position because those groups want to have some influence on the lawmaking process by meeting with them. The members figure that the groups will be more willing to take unethical measures, such as bribes, to promote their agenda. The corruptive power of staying in office can be seen in how the Republican Party’s viewpoint on term limits shifts in 1997. Previously, the Democratic Party had control of Congress, so the Republicans supported term limits more strongly, but when they won control in 1997, their support for term limits diminished because they wanted to stay in office as long as they could (Babbitt 30). Their change in opinion symbolizes that the power associated with a position in Congress corrupts the politicians because they become greedy and used to their new power and do not want to give it up. Overall, the supporters of term limits view it as a limit of corruption by being an automatic barrier to the corrupting forces political power has on people.

Although elections are part of our government to prevent low quality politicians from keeping power, it is extremely difficult to defeat incumbents. For instance, on average, incumbents win about 90% of their re-elections (“Arguments”). That rate is high when a person considers that many people seem fed up with the government and the performance of Congress. One reason for the high re-election rate is that some voters are not well-educated about the candidates before voting, so they just vote for whoever’s name they recognize on the ballot or whoever is part of the voters’ preferred political party (“Arguments”). The incumbents also have an advantage over challengers because they are able to raise more funds for campaigns. They develop financial relationships with special interest groups that want to have influence in politics (Blumel qtd. in Keck). In the 2010 Congressional elections, the average campaign funding for the House members was about \$1.4 million and for Senators it was about \$9.4 million while challengers had on average \$166,000 and \$519,000 respectively (“Arguments”). This high discrepancy shows that the politicians need to be limited, so they have less time to gain money from special interest groups. Elections also will be more effective because both candidates will have similar finances to spend on advertising. The more advertising a candidate has, the more easily they will be elected because the public will see their name and faces more. The need for term limits is great, so elections will be competitive and force candidates to focus on the issues instead of trying to buy their way into office.

Reasons Opposing Term Limits

Although in polls, Congressional term limits are popular among voters, they still are not the solution to fixing our political system. According to College of DuPage American Politics professor David Goldberg, term limits are popular because they are a “catchy idea ...a quick fix, and something to shake [the government] up” to correct the problems in Congress. Term limits, in fact, will make the current situation worse. They will weaken the power of the legislative branch and shift power to the executive branch, according to studies collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures (Bowser qtd. in Keck). The shift in power is due to the president retaining office while Congress gains new members, which will change the voting dynamic in Congress and give more power to the president, who will not have to deal with any changes in his branch of government. Although, due to elections, some Congress member would be replaced, term limits will cause more members to lose their seats than normal. Additionally, term limits would limit the quality of Congress’ decisions because it takes time for the new members to learn how to do their job well,

especially when it comes to building relationships with other members (Goldberg). Those relationships allow Congress to work together and form bills that the majority of them can agree on, so they can pass laws. Additionally, the more time a person has in Congress, the more knowledge they will gain in certain areas, so they can be experts on issues and have useful information for projects and committees (Keck). Therefore, term limits would hinder the quality of Congressional decisions because the members with expertise in areas will be lost when their time is over. Without expertise, Congress members will make uneducated decisions or will waste more time training the new members about the information the old ones learned before voting. Instead of improving Congress, term limits would worsen Congress' ability to serve their voters well.

In fact, representatives, who have taken pledges to self-limit their terms have regretted their pledge, such as Illinois Representative Timothy Johnson, because he “underestimated the value of seniority” (Bloomer qtd in Stone 5A). Like any other job, the more time a person has in it, the better they are able to do his/her job. The officials also gain power that help them benefit their constituents when they hold office for longer periods of times; the added time allows them to gain more money for their districts and be part of committees that can benefit their district (Stone 5A). In short, the power associated with a position in Congress can be also positive to do good for their voters, rather than just leading to corruption. Although 67% of the voters supported term limits, there really has not been a negative consequence for those officials that went back on their pledges. For example, Representative George Nethercutt promised to only have three terms, but he ran for a fourth term in 2000 and won (5A). This symbolizes that even though voters support term limits, when they have the choice, they will not look at how many term limits a candidate has served to determine if they should be re-elected or not.

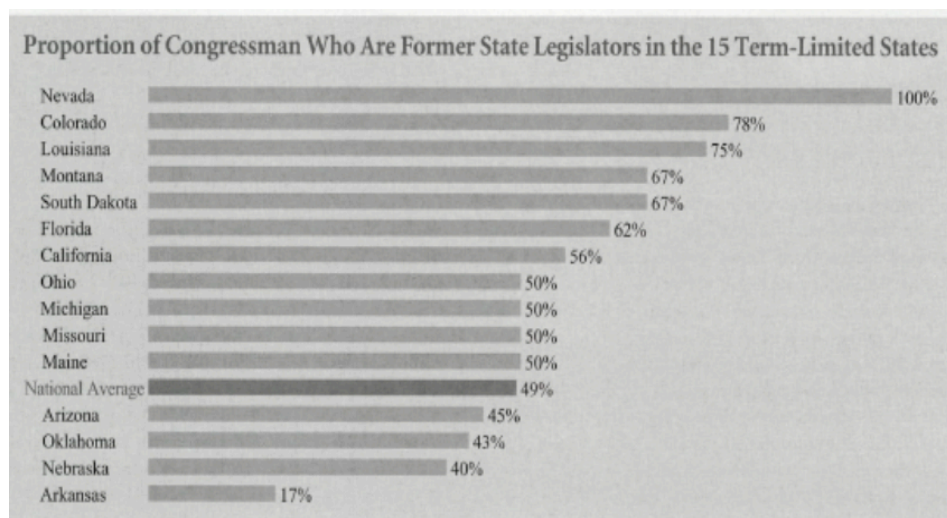


Figure 1
Proportion of Congressman Who Are Former State Legislators in the 15 Term-Limited States (National Conference of State Legislatures).

People in opposition of term limits see that the public support them because they think there is a problem with the system, so politicians must fix the underlying issues to truly correct the problems. Supporters of term limits say they will limit career politicians. However, there will still be career politicians because they will have the chance to run for other offices still. Figure one shows the high rate of state legislators with term limits switching to Congress, so term limits do not really resolve the issue of career politicians (Kurtz 9). Additionally, the U.S. already has elections to get rid of bad officials, so there is no need for term limits; to help curb corruption, voters need to be better

educated and attentive (Goldberg). Term limits are ineffective at solving the issues they are supposed to solve because they do not deal with the root of the problems.

Recent Candidate Opinion

In the upcoming election, Illinois governor primary candidate Bruce Rauner openly supports term limits to help change the workings of government in Illinois; however, he does not offer any in-depth information about how he will do it or how they will help. According to Professor Goldberg, Rauner is popular because he has a message that is popular among voters. He is consistent about his message but does not go into depth in the media about his term limit policy. If he wins the primary, he will probably give more details of the logistics of his term limit policy.

Overview

Congressional term limits are not a new idea in the United States, but they still carry a lot of support among voters. Supporters focus on the Founding Fathers as an example of what the government should be. Also, term limits will limit the corruption and career politicians, who are disconnected, in Congress. On the other side, opponents cite the regret of the representatives that took a term-limit pledge to show that term limits are not practical. Congress members need to build experience and knowledge about the lawmaking process in order to build relationships with other members and groups to enact new laws. The debate of term limits will probably continue for decades to come, but right now it seems unlikely that they will be enacted in the near future.

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