

A False Alternative

Limitation of terms is promoted as an idea whose time has come. It is featured as the final solution to virtually all problems that stem from government. If that sounds like an exaggeration, consider just a sampling of the reasons given for term limits by Americans to Limit Congressional Terms:

- Congress is corrupt, immoral, and out of control.
- Congress gave us 14 tax increases in 10 years and ran up a \$3.6 trillion debt.
- Congress has spent our Social Security funds.
- Congress has funded preposterous programs such as a study of the sex life of the Japanese quail, a study of the Hatfield-McCoy feud, and a study of manure handling.
- Congress receives special perks and subsidies.

The organization Americans to Limit Congressional Terms blames check kiting, pay raises, the savings and loan bailouts, special exemptions, lavish pensions — virtually every problem imaginable — on the length of time House and Senate members serve. Twelve-year limits, this group claims, will solve these problems.

It is, of course, true that Congress is plenty corrupt. So also were Sodom and Gomorrah. For anyone even to imply that corruption would end by sentencing the sinners to 12-year limits is itself a sin. Time in office has no relationship to the integrity of the office holders.

Dishonest and Deceptive

Statements found in ads and mail appeals that promote term limits are dishonest and deceptive. Consider, for example, the following assertion that appears in various forms in term limit literature:

In times past, America's lawmakers were not professional politicians. They were people with real jobs, who went to the nation's capitol a few months a year, then returned home to their full-time occupations. After serving a brief time in Congress, most returned

home to live under the laws they had passed.

America's early lawmakers were, on the contrary, professional statesmen. Most of them spent their entire lives in public office. However, they did so at great personal sacrifice. In those days, it was essential for an elected official to maintain his farm, business, or profession because pay for public office was modest. This fact of life had a positive effect on candidates. Only those with a real desire to serve had any desire to seek office.

Term limit salesmen point to the check-kiting scandal as an example of entrenched politicians flagrantly abusing their station in Congress. They offer assurances that term limits will put an end to such abuse. In looking over the list of congressmen who have written the bad checks, we find that most of them have served less than 12 years. And congressmen having greater tenure have been "grandfathered" in on all term limit proposals and would therefore be exempt from any such limitation. A term limit law, or amendment, would in fact have no effect whatsoever on the check-kiting scandal.

Term limit fund-raisers tell potential contributors that liberals in Congress grow more liberal the longer they are in office and that limiting the number of terms will give us a less liberal Congress. This is simply not the case. In checking old voting records as compiled by Tax Reform Immediately (TRIM), we find that new and old members of Congress are just about tied in their big-spending scores.

Power of the Ballot

Most problems created by Congress can be corrected at voting time. Voters already have the power to limit the term of any incumbent they choose simply by voting him out of office. Nothing cleanses so thoroughly as a vote against an incumbent who is known for his corrupt or self-serving practices. This principle betrays the entire term limit ruse.

But of what crime is Congress guilty? Congress is guilty not of ordinary theft,

but of legal plunder. Our nation is plagued not merely by a self-serving Congress, but by a growing number of citizens who partake of the spoils of congressional abuse. For this reason, it has become acceptable, if not even respectable, for members of Congress to brag about their cleverness in extracting more money from the treasury for the folks back home than their colleagues were able to obtain.

Will the big term limit binge rotate voters, too? Of course not! Yet, unless the voters choose differently on the basis of greater understanding, no cure for Congress exists. Voters who partake of the sins of Congress will elect new sinners. Thus, the pretext for the entire term limit issue is built upon sand and cannot deliver any of the promises of its promoters. Term limitation tackles the symptom, not the disease. The same voters who vote for liberals now will continue to vote for liberals regardless of the number of candidates or the number of terms they are allowed to serve.

Another Motive

Very likely, the high-class promotion experts know all of the above, and therefore they may have a motive other than term limits. Let us ask the obvious: Will a "corrupt Congress" (this label headlines their ads) limit its own terms? That is, will two-thirds majorities in the House and Senate move to amend the U.S. Constitution to limit their own years of service? Not likely! That being the case, the entire overheated, overstated issue can be expected to drive the states to their "last resort": The states will call a constitutional convention for the stated purpose of drafting a term limitation amendment in the event Congress fails to do so. State legislators, thinking that they will exercise authority over Congress, would place the U.S. Constitution in severe danger by calling for such a convention, since its powers cannot be limited.

Because of the baldness and falseness of the whole term limit matter, we are forced to conclude that the Constitution, not a clean Congress, is their target. ■

— DON FOTHERINGHAM