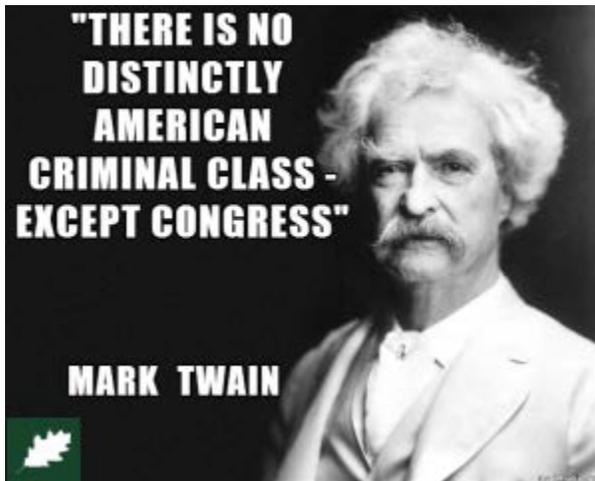


# Four Arguments in Favor of Legislative Term Limits

- by [John Engle](#)
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Limiting the term of office served by elected politicians has been a controversial issue in the United States for many years. At one time the federal government had no term limits, with the president and Congress allowed to remain in office as long as they could get reelected. Today, the president is limited to two terms, but congressmen and senators are still free to run again and again. And they do.

In the United States only [fifteen states](#) have legislatures with term limits. Across America, at the state and federal level, legislatures are full of career politicians who have been reelected regularly, sometimes for decades.

The dominance of incumbency prevents the rise of new voices in legislatures, and comfortable careerists often end up corrupted by power and compromised by interest groups. By instituting term limits, the problems of the status quo can be solved, and more responsible, accountable legislators may arise. Here are four arguments in favor of term limits for legislators.

## 1. Term Limits Restore Rotation in Office and the Citizen Legislature

It is gravely unfortunate that politics has become an accepted career path for citizens of democratic states. It is far better that participation in government be brief. To end politics as a lifetime sinecure, thereby making legislative service a leave of absence, rather than a means of permanently absconding from a productive career in the private sector, requires that there be term limits.

Without term limits, the temptation to remain in office for life will keep people seeking reelection long after they have accomplished all the legislative good of which they are capable. It does not take long for legislators to become more occupied with their relationships with each other and with lobbyists, than with their constituents.

Representative assemblies work best when they function as [citizen legislatures](#), in which people who pursue careers other than politics enter the legislative forum for a brief time to do their country service, and then leave again to reenter society as private citizens. Such citizen legislators who enter politics to make their mark and then leave are far more desirable than the career politicians of today who focus only on building their own power and influence, rather than considering the people they were elected to represent.

US states with ‘citizen legislatures’, where the state legislature is part time with short sessions so allowing its members to hold other jobs, were at the top of freedom indexes. New Hampshire was both the most minimal parliament and the state with most fiscal freedom according to the [Ruger-Sorens Index](#).

## **2. Term Limits Make for Better Elections and Empower New Leaders and Ideas**

Incumbency provides a huge electoral advantage. Sitting politicians almost always win reelection. The frequency with which they win varies over time and between states, but incumbency is always a powerful advantage. This is seen most visibly in the United States Congress of the past 30 years, in which it has become virtually impossible to unseat an incumbent legislator. Legislators are reelected because they have better name recognition both with the electorate and with lobby groups.

People have a tendency to vote for people they recognize, and firms tend to support past winners who will likely continue to benefit their interests. Term limits actually increase voter choice by making elections more competitive and encouraging more candidates to run.

In areas where term limits have been instituted there is far higher turnover amongst legislators, giving voters far more choice in who should represent them. In California, the institution of term limits on state legislators caused a rush of retirements, which led to 50 percent more candidates than would otherwise have been expected, as well as a marked increase in the diversity of the backgrounds of those elected.

Ultimately, old legislators using political machines to retain power do their country and constituents a disservice. Power is best used when it changes hands over time in order to allow for dynamic new solutions to be mooted in a changing world.

## **3. Term Limits Prevent Corruption and Exploitation of Office**

Power is highly intoxicating; it can corrupt even the most scrupled individual given enough exposure over time. For this reason, power should not be left in the hands of specific individuals for too long. When a politician is firmly entrenched, he may seek to enrich himself at the expense of the public. He may seek to shower benefices on family and allies in order to maintain and strengthen his powerful position.

Without term limits legislators often become self-serving, more interested in carving out personal power bases than with serving the people who elected them. Because legislators are so likely to be reelected, lobbyists and special interest groups find the lines of power in states’ capitals largely predictable, and are thus able to buy the influence of the permanent power nexuses in the legislature with relative ease.

Term limits serve to limit the ability of individuals to put forward self-serving legislation and to retain power indefinitely. Instead, by maintaining term limits, legislators have only a limited time in power, which tends to shift their focus toward genuinely benefiting the public.

## **4. Term Limits Favor Action Over Complacency**

A major focus of a legislator hoping to serve another term is on the next election and on vote-getting. It is often the case that hard decisions need to be made by legislators, but it is difficult for them to do so when they

are fixated on being reelected. Legislators have an incentive to put tough decisions off if they can retain power by doing so.

An example of such seemingly perpetual procrastination is Congress's attitude toward social security. The fund is set to become insolvent, by some estimates in less than two decades, yet congressmen and senators have chosen time and again to put off enacting painful, but necessary reform to the system. They find it easier to delay a decision until the next Congress, preferring their own reelection to the good of the nation.

When constrained by term limits, legislators must [make the most of their limited time](#) in office, resulting in greater prioritization of difficult decisions and reform. Furthermore, the need to constantly fight elections places politicians in the pocket of lobby-groups and election supporters to a greater degree, as they will always need to go back to them for support, and thus cannot make decisions that are in the national interest alone. While there will always be some of this behavior, it is curtailed by term limits, as legislators will, in their final term at the very least, not be beholden to as many special interests as they cannot run again.

Bolder legislative action is observed from retiring legislators in Congress, for example. When a congressman or senator does not intend to seek reelection, his tendency to vote along strict party lines diminishes substantially. Term limits, just like voluntary retirement, leads legislators to vote more on the basis of [principle](#) than on party lines.

It's time to clear the halls of Congress and state capitols of the career politicians. It's time to restore our citizen-democracy.