

Arguments for longer term limits disproved by what the data show

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If one boils down voters' discontent in November 2006 into a single sentiment, it would be that Republicans had focused more on having power than solving problems since their historic wins in 1994. Voters came to believe that Republicans did whatever they could to keep that power, regardless of whether their actions contradicted their principles (expanding Medicare), weakened their claim as the party of values (ethics scandals), and grew government to win votes through more pork (federal earmarks increased from 1,318 in 1994 to 13,997 in 2005).

Yet, after the resounding message from the voters in November 2006, the first thing Ohio politicians in the legislature did in January 2007 was to spurn the voters on term limits by advocating for a longer hold on power. Voters love term limits, which aim to limit the ability of politicians to gain and retain power. The move against term limits only reinforced the image of power-hungry politicians in the minds of voters.

The reason stated for the move to extend term limits another four years is that "you lose historical and institutional knowledge in dealing with problems. The problems are complex, and it takes a while for legislators to know what's happening."

If the process is too complex, it needs to be reformed so that legislators can figure out in less than eight years how to navigate it. If the substance is too complex to be solved in eight years, then we are electing the wrong people. In most areas of life, we solve complex issues in far less than eight years. Legislators face challenges, but it isn't like we are asking them to find cures for cancer or unravel the mysteries of the universe. But forget about common-sense answers. More important, does the claim of those wanting to extend term limits pass the sniff test of history? In looking at Statehouse members in the 106th (1965-1966), 113th (1979-1980), 120th (1993-1994), and 127th assemblies (2007-2008), it is clear that the need to retain "experienced" legislators is utterly baseless. The 127th Assembly has more experienced members than the 113th and only slightly fewer than the 120th, which was the first group to whom term limits applied.

Here are the facts:

- In the 113th Assembly, 13 out of 132 members, or 10 percent, remained from the 106th Assembly
- In the 120th Assembly, 24 out of 132 members, or 18 percent, remained from the 113th Assembly.
- In the 127th Assembly, 16 out of 132 members, or 12 percent, remained from the 120th Assembly.

It simply cannot be that for want of eight members, or 6 percent of the total Assembly, the Statehouse has lost the "historical and institutional knowledge" to deal with the complex problems facing Ohio.

So, how has the Statehouse retained the more-experienced members? First, more House members are moving into the Senate. In the 113th and 120th Assemblies, only three House members from the 106th and 113th Assemblies respectively made it to the Senate. In the 127th Assembly, seven House members made it to the Senate from the 120th Assembly, which, using the logic of the proponents of extending term limits, should have resulted in a more-effective Senate.

Next, some term-limited members made the very rare move of going from the Senate to the House. And they won't be the last, as more legislators fight to retain power, no matter how unseemly.

Finally, in the House, members have taken the required four years off and then run for the same or a different House seat, starting the term-limit clock anew if they win. This trend will continue for these "time-out" members, who seem to believe that the legislature simply cannot function without them.

Unlike Democrats, a significant credibility problem faced by Republicans in moving to extend term limits is that Republicans had total control over the levers of power from 1995 to 2007, yet proved unable to solve many complex problems. Now that Democrats control most of the statewide offices, moving to retain incumbents in the Statehouse by extending term limits looks like nothing more than political expediency.

Before politicians, and Republicans specifically, can expect the voters to trust them with power, they must place good public policy ahead of retaining power. Politicians in both parties would be wise to remember the lesson from 2006: Voters abhor power for power's sake.

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