

Term Limits Not the Problem; Party Sway Is

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Every year, someone pens a column blaming term limits for alleged Statehouse dysfunction. The latest missive comes from Thomas Suddes in "This is your legislature on term limits" (Forum, July 10). Suddes warns us "experience is the best teacher." Suddes had to inconveniently note that current Ohio House Speaker William Batchelder first began serving in the 1960s.

Before faulting term limits, writers should make sure the data actually support their conclusions. With term limits, they doesn't.

Ohioans passed term limits in 1992 with 66 percent of the vote. While it is hard to know each voter's intent, the disdain for career politicians and the power they accumulate likely ranked high on the list. Ohioans voted for less experience over more power. They failed, however, to account for the zeal politicians have in maintaining power.

Let me explain.

To see if term limits (i.e., inexperience) is indeed to blame for Ohio's alleged legislative ills, I looked at the legislative experience by member and General Assembly for five different terms: 1971-1972, 1981-1982, 1991-1992 (the last one before term limits), 2001-2002 and 2011-2012 (the current one).

The average years of experience for members for those terms are: 4.16, 7.41, 9.36, 4.24 and 6.54. Term limits cut the average by more than half just 10 years later. After term limits, as Suddes correctly noted, those wily politicians began the practice of jumping back and forth and back between the House and Senate. This bouncing practice resulted in the average rising by 54 percent over the last 10 years, so that the average now is only 12 percent less than the average in the halcyon days of 1981-1982 (ironically, just before the partisan passage of Ohio's collective-bargaining law).

In terms of institutional experience, the total years of experience over those five terms was: 549, 978, 1,235, 560 and 863. Again, the total years of experience today is only 12 percent less than the total experience in 1981-1982. So much for inexperience being responsible for today's Statehouse ills.

If you peel back the onion even more, you will find yet another surprise. Over those five terms, the number of members with 30 years or more of experience was 0, 2, 1, 0 and 4. Those with 20 years or more totaled 2, 5, 14, 2 and 14. That's right, there

are as many seasoned veterans today as in the year before the term limits amendment passed.

Perhaps there is something else to blame for Ohio's legislative ills.

Suddes lamented the loss of rebels who he says are being shown the door due to term limits. I would submit that a more likely culprit of legislative ills and fewer rebels is the aggressive actions taken by both the Republican and Democratic parties to handpick candidates and involve themselves in primaries to ensure their guy or gal wins. This practice breeds extreme loyalty to the parties and their leadership, but leaves we the people in the back seat.

Competitive primaries are a good thing. Proverbs teaches us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Having run a tough primary campaign in Colorado where the party was prohibited from getting involved, the victor would unequivocally tell you that our stiff challenge made him a better candidate and helped him win the general election by 121 votes.

It isn't experience that creates rebels willing to challenge leadership and fight aggressively on behalf of their constituencies. Rather, it is a robust, party-free primary system that gives rebels and nonparty loyalists a fair chance to win and take their independence to Columbus.

As for the issue of legislators not knowing how things work, either we've made the system too complex, or we are sending the wrong people to Columbus. If eight years really isn't enough time to learn the rules and get some things done, then we need to reform how the Statehouse works. A child who cannot read, write or do math will enter and exit elementary and middle school knowing algebra and chemistry in eight years.

It is time to stop blaming term limits and find another boogeyman for Ohio's Statehouse ills.

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