

Is It Time for Term Limits?

- 1 In 1799, when George Washington's supporters asked him to consider serving a third term as president of the United States, he declared, "Prudence on my part must arrest any attempt at the well meant, but mistaken views of my friends, to introduce me again into the Chair of Government." Even though some of his contemporaries advocated for a lifetime appointment for presidents, Washington thought that government officials should not seek to gain unfair power. Only one president has been elected to four terms: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was elected to a third term in 1940 and a fourth in 1944 due to the challenges of the Great Depression and World War II. This departure from the rule worried some, and on March 21, 1947, Congress passed the Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution, legally limiting the office of president to two four-year terms.
- 2 Presidential terms are clearly limited in the Constitution, but for people serving in Congress, this is not the case. Currently, members of the House of Representatives, who serve two-year terms, and Senators, who serve six-year terms, can run for reelection an unlimited number of times. Because of the possibility of unlimited reelections, many people are beginning to believe that limiting congressional terms would benefit our government. Modern surveys conducted by multiple firms consistently show that American citizens of a variety of backgrounds and political leanings approve of the idea of setting term limits for members of Congress.
- 3 American citizens are not the only supporters of term limits for Congress. Even some members of Congress themselves have spoken out in support of this change. Former Senator Joe Lieberman, upon his retirement, suggested that Congress "might be healthier and less partisan¹ and less rigid if it turned over more often, and term limits are one way to do that." Michael Olson and Jon Rogowski state in their article "Legislative Term Limits and Polarization" that "proponents of term limits argue that limiting the number of terms legislators can serve in office would reduce the level of partisan conflict, encourage compromise and cooperation, and improve the quality of representation."
- 4 Experienced politicians certainly can build on years of knowledge, but term limit supporters point out that career politicians may base key decisions on their own personal long-term goals. In the article "Term Limitations and the Myth of the Citizen-Legislator," author Elizabeth Garrett states that "under term limits, a careerist needs to move up the political opportunity structure to remain in elected office, but the probability of unimpeded upward movement decreases as the number of available positions that are perceived as advancements decline."
- 5 While challenging the career politician's path is seen as a benefit to term limit supporters, there is a possibility that a Congress mostly composed of newcomers could severely affect policy making. Experienced politicians have a deep knowledge of congressional processes, and in addition, politicians who have served together for extended periods have a chance to develop trusting relationships, even across party lines. Molly Reynolds, a congressional expert for the Brookings Institution, says that members who are restricted by term limits "have neither the time nor the incentive to develop the relevant expertise they need to be good at their jobs. If members don't have that expertise themselves, they're more likely to rely on outsiders, including lobbyists, to replace that expertise."
- 6 In fact, first-time politicians' susceptibilities to lobbyists, or groups seeking to influence legislators, have actually been put to the test on the state level. In 2006, the National Conference of State Legislators Study revealed that term limits may increase the influence of lobbyists. In the 1990s, more

¹**partisan:** showing a strong and sometimes blind adherence to a particular political party

than twenty states implemented term limits within their state governments. The inexperienced state lawmakers began depending on special-interest groups for their expertise on issues. In the end, many people believed that implementing term limits in the state legislature caused problems, and since then, six states have repealed the limits.

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- Additionally, those who oppose term limits maintain that the turnover rate in Congress is sufficient. Thomas E. Mann, Senior Fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution, notes that every decade, new members replace at least half the members of the House and the Senate, due to retirement or elections. Still, the average length of time in office has mushroomed. For example, the 65th Congress (1917–1919) had an average service time of 5.3 years for members of the House of Representatives and 5.7 years for Senate members. The 114th Congress (2015–2017) had an average of 8.8 years for members of the House and 9.7 years for senators.
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- Should Congress pass a constitutional amendment to institute congressional term limits? Perhaps one day people will have a chance to vote on the issue.

PERCENTAGE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND SENATORS REELECTED

House of Representatives Total seats: 435	Year	Percentage Reelected
	1950	83.2
	1978	82.3
	1998	90.8
	2016	87.4

Senate Total seats: 100	Year	Percentage Reelected
	1950	68.8
	1978	60.0
	1998	89.7
	2016	93.1