

Presidential Term Limit Contravention: Abolish, Extend, Fail, or Respect?

Comparative Political Studies

2019, Vol. 52(10) 1500–1534

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DOI: 10.1177/0010414019830737

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Abstract

Since presidential term limits were (re)adopted by many states during the third wave of democratization, 221 presidents across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia have reached the end of their term(s) in office. Of these, 30% have attempted to contravene term limits, resulting in either full abolition, one-term extensions, or failure. What explains these divergent trajectories? I argue that trends in electoral competition over time best predict term limit outcomes, with noncompetitive elections permitting full abolition, less competitive elections allowing for one-term extensions, and competitive elections leading to failed bids. This is because electoral trends provide informational cues to the president's co-partisan legislators and constitutional court judges (the actors who ultimately rule on constitutional term limit amendments) about the cost/benefit analysis that voting to uphold or repeal term limits would have on their own political survival. These findings suggest a linkage between political uncertainty and constitutional stability more generally.