

## EXPLAINING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR LEGISLATIVE TERM LIMITS

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**Abstract** A number of theories have been offered to explain popular support for term limits and their passage in states across the country. Using survey data from the 1992 American National Election Study and several other statewide surveys, this article examines the following explanations for term limits support: dissatisfaction with Congress and state legislatures, cynicism, self-interest, and ideology. An analysis of these data suggest that term limits support is not influenced by a dissatisfaction with legislatures or particular incumbents or by a specific ideology. Instead, support for term limits is related to cynicism and, to some extent, self-interest.

In recent years, placing limits on the number of terms legislators may serve has proven extremely popular. Public opinion polls show strong support for term limits, and voters have implemented such sentiments by passing initiatives appearing on state ballots. Between 1990 and 1994, voters in 21 states approved initiatives limiting the number of terms legislators may serve. The nature and scope of these restrictions have varied from one state to another, ranging from as little as 6 to as many as 12 years in office for U.S. Representatives. In addition, some term limits initiatives applied to only state legislators, whereas in other states limits applied to both state and federal legislators. Despite these differences, term limits initiatives passed in almost every state where they appeared on the ballot, and most of them passed with little or no opposition. Not since the tax revolt swept across the country in the late 1970s has the United States witnessed such a swift and popular uprising. Both movements appear to have capitalized on the public's mounting discontent with the political process.

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## Explaining Public Opinion on Term Limits

A common theme in most commentary on term limits is that support for limiting terms at both the federal and state levels is a reflection of the public's frustration with government, based in part on a deep dissatisfaction with Congress and state legislatures or a lack of confidence in government. Supporting term limits provides voters with an opportunity to express their anger and frustration by saying, "Let's throw the bums out." Aside from symbolic value, term limits provide a means of reforming the system, thereby altering the character of representation. Although it remains difficult to anticipate the full ramifications of term limitations, it is expected that certain groups will benefit from them. The Republican Party has formally endorsed the idea and scholars suggest that women may also benefit. Term limits may also have the effect of weakening legislatures, pleasing conservatives and upsetting liberals.

These explanations for support, however, remain speculative and have yet to be examined empirically. The purpose of this article is to provide a more complete understanding of the term limits phenomenon. There are four explanations commonly used to account for the sources of support for term limits: (1) dissatisfaction with legislative performance, (2) cynicism, (3) self-interest, and (4) ideological predispositions. In the following section, I elaborate on these explanations. Following this discussion, I undertake an empirical test of hypotheses derived from these theories.

### DISSATISFACTION WITH LEGISLATIVE PERFORMANCE

Support for term limitations on both members of Congress and state legislators, according to conventional wisdom, seems to result from widespread dissatisfaction with legislative bodies. Given that the movement coincides with the lowest approval ratings ever recorded for Congress, this theory seems, at first glance, to be plausible. Since 1974, public support for Congress typically has fallen within the 27–35 percent range (Patterson and Magleby 1992). In the early 1990s, however, approval of Congress plummeted, reaching an all-time low of 17 percent in April 1992, soon after House members' bank overdrafts became public. However, while congressional approval dropped in the 1990s, it was by no means unusual, having fallen in 1975 and 1979 to about 20 percent.

Surveys show similar levels of disdain for state legislatures, though some surveys show that individuals may be more critical of Congress (Cotter 1986; Jewell 1982; Newkirk 1979). Among state legislatures, professional legislatures, which have characteristics similar to the U.S.

Congress, appear to be held in the least regard (Jewell 1982; Squire 1993).

Previous research has found that evaluations of legislative performance are dependent on such factors as the state of the economy, media scrutiny, and presidential popularity (Jacobson 1993, 162–64; Parker 1977; Patterson and Caldeira 1990). A chronically unbalanced federal budget, combined with recent scandals and media scrutiny, may have contributed to the notion that Congress is in need of reform. Restricting legislators' terms not only promises reform but may also serve as a means of registering protest with legislatures that appear to be unable to solve important problems.

Despite broad dissatisfaction with the institution, individual members have been successful in drawing a distinction between themselves and the institutions in which they serve by emphasizing their service to constituents and their own personal characteristics (Parker and Davidson 1979). As a result, most members are reelected to Congress. However, while approval ratings for an individual member have always been significantly higher than that of the institution, an incumbent's ability to distance himself or herself from the institution appears to have been hampered in recent years (Patterson and Magleby 1992). Increasing dissatisfaction with individual lawmakers may lead individuals to embrace term limits as a means of removing those who are protected by incumbency advantage.

#### DISSATISFACTION WITH POLITICAL PROCESS

A second view posits that support for term limits may not be related to a legislature's inability to solve important problems but, rather, may be caused by a dissatisfaction with the political process, manifested by political cynicism. Widespread feelings of discontent within the electorate have been well documented (Abramson 1983; Craig 1993; Miller 1974). While congressional disapproval varies with the state of the economy, there has been a steady long-term decline in public confidence since the 1960s. In 1958 and 1964, about three out of four Americans said the government in Washington could be trusted to do what is right just about always or most of the time, but that percentage has dropped steadily. In 1980, only one in four Americans trusted the government to do what is right (Abramson 1983). Survey data from the 1992 Center for Political Studies National Election Study (Miller et al. 1993) indicate a further decline in political trust. In 1992, 63 percent of the respondents said they could trust the government in Washington only some of the time; in contrast, only 3 percent said they could always trust the government in Washington to do what is right.

Miller (1974) argues that low levels of trust reflect a withdrawal of support not just from particular incumbents but from the regime as well. Miller maintains that "such feelings of powerlessness and normlessness are very likely to be accompanied by hostility toward political and social leaders, the institutions of government, and the regime as a whole" (p. 951). This discontent may result in the electoral practice of "throwing the rascals out" or radical political change. In response, Citrin (1974) contends that Miller's claims of radical change are overstated and that the decline in trust probably reflects a dissatisfaction with the persons running government rather than the system as a whole. While persons may express cynicism about government, they nonetheless continue to express allegiance to the political system. According to Citrin, expressions of cynicism are primarily ritualistic rather than genuine, the consequences having a symbolic rather than an instrumental impact on the polity.

In examining the sources of support for the tax revolt in the 1970s, Lowery and Sigelman (1981) characterized the revolt as a "style issue," one that involved an expression of symbolic attitudes rather than an expression of immediate self-interest. Similarly, Sears and Citrin (1982) portray the revolt as more of a symbolic protest rather than a concern for a specific policy. Politicians were portrayed as self-serving, insensitive, and unaware of the problems that the average person faces. Such stereotypes struck a chord with voters because they played on voters' cynicism about government. Like the tax revolt, the term limits movement might well be a symbolic protest. According to this line of reasoning, it would not necessarily matter to voters whether term limits were applied to members of the U.S. Congress or part-time state legislators. Instead, term limits offer an opportunity to vent frustration with government. Thus, the idea of limiting legislators' terms is not so much a solution to a specific problem as it is a reflection of cynicism and anger.

### SELF-INTEREST

Another theory conceives popular support for term limits as a function of individual-level political and social characteristics as well as state characteristics. Though the effects of term limits are difficult to estimate and remain at best speculative, it is no doubt clear that certain groups expect to benefit from term limits. For example, term limits are expected to weaken Democratic control over legislatures at the state and national level by reducing the advantage of incumbency enjoyed by their majority status. Having been the minority party in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1952 and the Senate since 1986,

the Republican Party embraced term limits as a means of breaking the Democratic stronghold. Republican identifiers may view term limits on members of Congress as an effective means of forcing out entrenched Democrats and altering the membership of Congress. At the state level, Republicans may be more likely to support term limits where Democrats hold majorities.

Women remain grossly underrepresented by the current status quo in Congress and in most state legislatures. Although more women are running for political office than ever before, they are not expected to increase their representation substantially in the short run due to incumbency advantage (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1987, p. 137). However, scholars expect the implementation of term limitations to create a larger number of open seats, which would increase the proportion of women in state legislatures in the short run as the "drag of incumbency" is reduced (Thompson and Moncrief 1993). As a result, women may embrace the idea of limiting the terms of legislators as a means of altering the status quo and possibly increasing their representation in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures. In their analysis of a 1990 California term limits initiative, Donovan and Snipp (1994, p. 498) found that women were more likely to support the initiative than were men.

Aside from individual self-interest, support for term limits may also vary from state to state depending on another aspect of self-interest—the clout of a state's congressional delegation. Term limits, it has been argued, will destroy seniority as the predominant source of power in the Congress, dramatically reducing the clout of some states. Informing voters that term limits would result in the loss of clout was a major campaign strategy mounted by those opposing term limits measures, especially in states like Washington and Michigan. In Washington, for example, a 1991 term limits initiative would have removed then Speaker of the House Tom Foley after just 2 more years of office. During the campaign, Foley warned voters that term limits would deprive Washington state of power and allow California to grab the state's water resources. In Michigan, term limits opponents warned voters that the state would lose influence on Capitol Hill and claimed, "The Chrysler bailout never would have happened if term limits were in place" (Galvin 1992).

The expectation that self-interest plays a role in shaping opinions on this issue may at first appear unreasonable, for it seems that only a highly sophisticated voter is able to anticipate the full implications of such reforms. Moreover, a substantial body of literature has found that the effects of self-interest, even when narrowly defined, are weak at best (Feldman 1982; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Sears et al. 1980).

In examining the explanations used to account for the success of the tax revolt, Lowery and Sigelman (1981) found little evidence to suggest that concern over material benefits structured opinions on tax referenda.

Nevertheless, scholars have argued that voters need not be thoroughly informed and highly sophisticated to act on the basis of self-interest. Rather than anticipating the likely consequences of a particular policy, voters make retrospective evaluations of the incumbent's performance, and then reward or punish accordingly with their votes (Fiorina 1981; Tufte 1978). In addition, voters who remain relatively uninformed nevertheless can reason through choices by employing "information shortcuts" (Popkin 1994). Instead of relying on one's own calculations of self-interest, an individual may rely on cues from political elites. These cues can help individuals organize political issues and ideas. Exposure to elite messages may depend in part on an individual's political awareness as well as the intensity of the message. In recent years, as the political debate over the issue has intensified with the passage of statewide initiatives, term limits have become more salient. As a result, individuals, especially those who are politically aware, are likely to have heard the debate and, as a result, are more likely to form opinions that are consistent with their self-interest.

#### IDEOLOGY

The fourth and final explanation for term limits support is based on ideology. The professionalization of politics, according to some term limits proponents, has contributed to a burgeoning federal bureaucracy, huge legislative staffs, and undue influence by special interest groups. Careerism is also said to be directly associated with large deficits (Will 1992, p. 185). Limiting the terms of legislators may be viewed as a solution to wasteful government. Malcolm Jewell (1993) suggests that the activists behind the term limits movement in most of the states are not so much motivated by disillusionment with the legislative process as they are with the legislative product. From the viewpoint of the activists, who are predominantly conservatives, state legislatures spend too much money on unnecessary programs and raise too much tax revenue to support these programs. Term limits would remove entrenched lawmakers which, it is hoped, would reduce taxes and limit government regulation. According to some conservative proponents like George Will (1992), legislators who serve under the specter of term limits would be less likely to pursue endless pork for their districts. Other conservative proponents support term limits simply as a means of weakening government.

## Testing the Explanations

### EXPECTATIONS

To summarize, the first explanation hypothesizes that individuals who disapprove of either individual members or of Congress's performance are more likely to support term limits for members of Congress. Similarly, individuals who disapprove of state legislatures are more likely to support term limits for state legislators. The second view assumes that individuals who are cynical are more likely to support term limitations as a way of expressing discontent. The third view assumes that women and Republicans are more likely to support term limits because limits might increase their representation. Finally, conservatives who favor limited government may be more likely to favor term limitations, as compared with liberals who favor an active government.

### DATA

Any secondary analysis that relies on survey data is limited by the scope and nature of a survey. Nevertheless, several surveys are available that provide an opportunity to examine the explanations outlined above. In the following analysis, three surveys are used: the 1992 American National Election Study (NES), the Florida Opinion Poll administered by Florida State University Survey Research Center, and the Wyoming Statewide Election Survey administered by the University of Wyoming Survey Research Center. The NES data provide a means of examining national support for limiting members of Congress, while the data from Florida are used to examine support for limits on state legislators. The Wyoming data are used to examine opinions on a specific term limits initiative that proposed term limits for state legislators, members of the state's congressional delegation, and the governor.

Florida and Wyoming were selected because they differ sharply on key variables, which strengthens the external validity of this analysis. Florida has a large and diverse population and was considered to be a pivotal state in the 1992 presidential election. It has a professionalized state legislature where, at the time of the survey, the Democratic Party had a 60 percent majority in both houses of the state legislature. In contrast, Wyoming has a small population and is predominantly conservative. It has an amateur legislature and was one of the few states where the Republicans had a majority in both houses (Council of State Governments 1990). In Florida, the proportion of women in the Florida state legislature was about 16 percent, slightly less than the national

average of 18 percent (Clark 1994). In Wyoming the proportion of women in the state legislature was much higher, about 25 percent. While women remain underrepresented in both states, women may have been more likely to favor term limits in Florida than in Wyoming.

#### METHODS

The first model estimated is based on NES data, and all of the following variables, unless otherwise stated, have been recoded to range from one to negative one, with zero representing the middle position on the scale. To avoid losing missing data, "don't knows" are placed at the middle category and coded as zero.

Job approval is used to measure dissatisfaction with Congress and individual members. Cynicism is operationalized using the four standard NES questions that form the trust index. There has been considerable debate regarding the validity of this index. According to Craig (1993), there is ambiguity as to whether respondents are being asked to express their attitudes toward governmental institutions generally, Congress, the incumbent president, political authorities in general, or institutional performance. While the measure might well be tapping attitudes toward both incumbent authorities and governmental institutions, it nevertheless does not appear to be highly correlated with evaluations of congressional performance ( $r = .39$ ) and individual members ( $r = .04$ ).<sup>1</sup>

As was argued previously, the effect of self-interest may depend in part on an individual's level of political sophistication and awareness. While there is considerable debate over how to measure such a concept, an increasing number of studies conclude that factual knowledge is the single best indicator of sophistication and its related concepts, such as political awareness (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Luskin 1987; Zaller 1991). The NES study includes several knowledge measures used to form a four-item index recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993, p. 1198). These are general civics questions (i.e., party control of Congress, power of judicial review, party ideological location, recognition of vice president's name) with good discriminating power. In using this measure it is assumed that persons who are knowledgeable about politics are also more politically aware (Zaller 1992).

Aside from gender and partisanship, individual support may vary from state to state depending on the clout of a state's congressional delegation. Individuals may weigh the loss of clout against any perceived benefits when forming an opinion on term limitations. To mea-

1. Moreover, when the items forming the trust index are factor analyzed with congressional job approval and incumbent evaluations, they form two independent dimensions.

sure clout, a scale was created that ranks states by the total number of party leaders, chairs, and ranking members in the delegation. The type of committee that a member chairs was also considered.

Finally, two additional dummy variables are used to control for the possible effects of the individual term limits campaigns being conducted in 14 states at the time of the survey. Of the 14 states that had term limits initiatives on the ballot in 1992, only three, California, Washington, and Michigan, faced serious opposition. Thus individuals in these states were more likely to be exposed to negative information about term limits than individuals in other states.

A similar model is used to explain term limits support in Florida and Wyoming. In Florida, the model estimates support for term limits on state legislators, whereas in Wyoming the model is based on support for a pending term limits initiative. In both cases, a measure of political knowledge is not available. Instead, level of education is used as a proxy. While education and political sophistication are not the same thing, the two are nevertheless correlated ( $r = .5$  based on the 1992 NES). The person with considerable formal schooling, on average, is more likely to acquire and make use of political information than the person with minimal schooling (see Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991, p. 21). Most of the remaining variables used in these models are the same, with some exceptions that are listed in the Appendix.

Because the dependent variables are dichotomous and skewed, logistic regression is used to estimate the probabilities for each independent variable.<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

Tables 1–3 display the results for the three models. A pseudo- $R^2$  is provided to illustrate the fit of the model, although such measures should be interpreted with caution (see Aldrich and Nelson 1984, pp. 58–59; Hagle and Mitchell 1992, p. 782). The overall fit of the model is poor, indicating that these four explanations either alone or together cannot account for the total support that the term limits movement has received. As the results in table 1 show, the main effects of party are not significant, suggesting that Republicans are no more likely to support term limits for members of Congress than are Democrats. However, when political knowledge is taken into consideration, parti-

2. Of the 2,295 initial respondents in the NES study, 77 percent agreed that the terms of members of Congress should be limited, while 17 percent opposed the idea, with the remaining 5 percent undecided. Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding error. A similar proportion, 78 percent, favored the term limits initiative in Wyoming, compared with 73 percent, who favored term limits for Florida state legislators. The undecided have been omitted from the analysis.

**Table 1.** Limiting Terms of **Members of Congress**, Logistic Regression Coefficients

| Explanation and Variable                      | Hypothesized Direction | Coefficient | Standard Error | Effect |
|---|------------------------|-------------|----------------|--------|
| Self-interest:                                |                        |             |                |        |
| Female  | +                      | -.036       | .281           | -.005  |
| Female × political knowledge                  | +                      | .126        | .097           | .019   |
| Political knowledge                           |                        | .107        | .075           | .016   |
| Party identification                          | +                      | -.067       | .072           | -.010  |
| Party identification × political knowledge    | +                      | .080**      | .025           | .012   |
| Clout of state's delegation                   | -                      | .014        | .021           | .002   |
| Dissatisfaction with legislative performance: |                        |             |                |        |
| Congress                                      | +                      | .010        | .098           | .002   |
| Representative                                | +                      | .109        | .079           | .016   |
| Dissatisfaction with political process:       |                        |             |                |        |
| Cynicism                                      | +                      | .200**      | .037           | .029   |
| Ideology                                      | +                      | .007        | .056           | .001   |
| Term limits campaigns:                        |                        |             |                |        |
| Strong opposition                             | -                      | -.408*      | .207           | -.060  |
| Little opposition                             | +                      | .280        | .178           | .041   |
| Constant                                      |                        | .687**      | .257           |        |
| N   |                        | 1,938       |                |        |
| Model chi-square (with 12 df)                 |                        | 103.034**   |                |        |
| Percent correctly classified                  |                        | 82.03       |                |        |
| Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>                         |                        | .05         |                |        |

SOURCE.—American National Election Study, 1992: ICPSR #6067 (Miller et al. 1993).

NOTE.—Dependent variable: "A law has been proposed that would limit members of Congress to no more than 12 years of service in that office. Do you favor or oppose such a law?" 1 = favor; 0 = oppose. Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> calculated using the corrected Aldrich-Nelson as recommended by Hagle and Mitchell (1992, pp. 774–77). Effect = net effect of a one-unit change in the independent variable evaluated at the mean (.82).

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Limiting Terms of Florida State Legislators, Logistic Regression Coefficients

| Explanations and Variables                    | Hypothesized Direction | Coefficient | Standard Error | Effect |
|---|------------------------|-------------|----------------|--------|
| Self-interest:                                |                        |             |                |        |
| Female  | +                      | .973        | .515           | .144   |
| Female × education                            | +                      | -.123       | .108           | -.018  |
| Education                                     |                        | -.117       | .073           | -.017  |
| Party identification                          | +                      | -.051       | .118           | -.008  |
| Party identification × education              | +                      | .023        | .025           | .003   |
| Dissatisfaction with legislative performance: |                        |             |                |        |
| State legislature                             | +                      | .022        | .167           | .003   |
| Dissatisfaction with political process:       |                        |             |                |        |
| Cynicism                                      | +                      | .420*       | .162           | .062   |
| Ideology                                      | +                      | .033        | .141           | .005   |
| Constant                                      |                        | 1.57**      | .347           |        |
| N   |                        | 888         |                |        |
| Model chi-square (with 8 df)                  |                        | 23.46**     |                |        |
| Percent correctly classified                  |                        | 80.07       |                |        |
| Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>                         |                        | .12         |                |        |

SOURCE.—Florida Opinion Survey, 1991.  
 NOTE.—Dependent variable: “Do you agree or disagree that members of the Florida state legislature in Tallahassee should be limited to two consecutive terms?” 1 = agree; 0 = disagree. Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> calculated using the corrected Aldrich-Nelson as recommended by Hagle and Mitchell (1992, pp. 774–777). Effect = net effect of a one-unit change in the independent variable evaluated at the mean (.73).  
 †  $p = .06$ .  
 \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.** Wyoming's Term Limit Initiative, Logistic Regression Coefficients

| Explanation and Variable                      | Hypothesized Direction | Coefficient | Standard Error | Effect |
|---|------------------------|-------------|----------------|--------|
| Self-interest:                                |                        |             |                |        |
| Female  | +                      | .734        | .839           | .108   |
| Female × education                            | +                      | -.106       | .202           | -.016  |
| Education                                     |                        | -.081       | .135           | -.012  |
| Party identification                          | -                      | .036        | .221           | .005   |
| Party identification × education              | -                      | .038        | .053           | .006   |
| Dissatisfaction with legislative performance: |                        |             |                |        |
| Members of state legislature                  | +                      | -.143       | .216           | -.021  |
| Congressional delegation                      | +                      | .152        | .089           | .022   |
| Governor                                      | +                      | .017        | .194           | .003   |
| Dissatisfaction with political process:       |                        |             |                |        |
| Cynicism                                      | +                      | .220**      | .073           | .033   |
| Ideology                                      | +                      | -.057       | .091           | -.008  |
| Constant                                      |                        | 1.221*      | .594           |        |
| N   |                        | 572         |                |        |
| Model chi-square (with 10 df)                 |                        | 24.163**    |                |        |
| Percent correctly classified                  |                        | 82.2        |                |        |
| Pseudo- $R^2$                                 |                        | .09         |                |        |

Source. — Wyoming Preelection survey, 1992, University of Wyoming.

Note. — Dependent variable: "It has been proposed that limits be placed on the terms of various government officials in Wyoming. Under the proposed law, U.S. Senators and Wyoming state senators would be limited to 12 years in office, the Wyoming governor would be limited to 8 years in office, and U.S. Representatives would be limited to 6 years in office. Do you think terms of state and federal officials in Wyoming should be limited?" 1 = favor; 0 = oppose. Pseudo- $R^2$  calculated using the corrected Aldrich-Nelson as recommended by Hagle and Mitchell (1992, pp. 774–77). Effect = net effect of a one-unit change in the independent variable evaluated at the mean (.78).

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

san differences do emerge. As political knowledge increases, Republicans become more supportive, while Democrats become less supportive. Strong Republican identifiers who are the most knowledgeable, all other things being equal, have a probability of supporting term limits that is 27 percent greater than their Democratic counterparts. In tables 2 and 3, however, there are no partisan differences in either state even when the level of education is taken into account.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding gender differences, the coefficient for women in all three models is not significant even when the level of political knowledge is taken into account. It should be noted, however, that the coefficient for women in Florida is approaching statistical significance.

Interestingly, Congress's poor performance appears to have no influence on term limits support.<sup>4</sup> Individuals who disapprove of Congress are just as likely to support term limits as those who approve of Congress. Evaluations of individual lawmakers are similarly unrelated to term limits support. Evaluations of state legislatures in Florida and Wyoming also appear to have little influence in structuring opinions on term limitations for state legislators.

Turning to the discontent hypothesis, we see that cynicism has by far the strongest and most consistent effect across the three models. Persons who are more cynical are more likely to support term limits. When all other factors are held at mean levels, persons who are most cynical have a probability of supporting term limits for members of Congress that is 32 percent greater than the most trusting persons. While cynicism does have a strong effect, it is not enough to guarantee support. Even the most trusting individuals, when all other variables are held constant at their means, have an expected probability of supporting term limits that is just greater than 50 percent. Nevertheless, it is clear that high levels of cynicism are in part responsible for the widespread support for term limits.

The theory that individuals support or reject the idea for ideological reasons is not supported. Conservatives are no more likely to support the issue than are liberals.

3. While education is not necessarily the same as political knowledge, the two measures appear to have the same interactive effects. Replacing the measures of political knowledge with level of education in the NES model yields similar results. The interaction between party and education is significant at the .01 level, whereas the interaction between gender and level of education is not quite significant ( $p = .09$ ).

4. As was mentioned earlier, dissatisfaction with Congress and cynicism are correlated, raising the possibility of multicollinearity. The model was estimated with and without dissatisfaction with Congress and the estimates for cynicism do not change. When the model is estimated without cynicism, dissatisfaction with Congress has a large and significant effect. However, the effects of dissatisfaction with Congress go away when controlling for cynicism. This may result from the fact that a four-item index performs better than a single-item index. However, when each of the four items forming the cynicism index is run separately, each is significant, but the Congress item is not.

Finally, the results from the NES data in table 1 show no significant difference between individuals in states where term limits initiatives appeared on state ballots and individuals in the rest of the country. However, individuals were less likely to support term limits on members of Congress in California, Michigan, and Washington where there were organized campaigns to defeat the initiatives.

## Discussion

These findings point to the conclusion that individual support for term limitations can best be explained by cynicism and to some extent self-interest and not ideology or dissatisfaction with legislatures. Cynicism is consistently related to support for term limitations for either federal or state legislators, whether it be a hypothetical proposal or an actual initiative. Evaluations of legislative institutions, whether it be the U.S. Congress or the Florida state legislature, did not appear to influence support for term limits. These findings run contrary to conventional wisdom, which assumes that strong dissatisfaction with legislative performance generates strong support for term limits. Instead, opinions on term limits appear to be based on a widespread lack of confidence in government. In short, term limits support stems not from legislatures' inability to produce outputs in accordance with individual expectations but, rather, from a frustration with the political process, manifested in an increasingly cynical electorate. That cynicism is such a strong predictor for constitutional reform suggests that Citrin (1974) may have underestimated the potential influence of high levels of cynicism. Voters' willingness to change the rules of the game by instituting term limitations may not be the radical political change envisioned by Miller (1974) but will nonetheless have lasting consequences.

These results also show the potential for self-interested behavior. Individuals who are politically aware may view term limits as a way of gaining partisan advantage. For Republicans, term limits may have been seen as a way of breaking up the Democratic majorities in Congress that appeared to remain fixed in time by virtue of incumbency advantage. This assumes that individuals have thought about the issue and can anticipate its consequences. This need not necessarily be the case. Persons who are more knowledgeable about politics are more likely to be attentive to politics and would have heard or read something about the issue. The Republican Party has been vocal in its support for congressional term limits. It seems quite reasonable to conclude that strong party identifiers who are politically aware responded to the partisan rhetoric. The lack of partisan differences in Florida can probably be attributed to the lower profile of the state legislature as

compared with the U.S. Congress. Even those who are highly educated may not have known that the Democrats control the state legislature or heard how term limitations might impact the partisan distribution of the state legislature. The lack of partisan differences in Wyoming may also result from the fact that the term limits initiative applied to various elected officials, including the governor, state legislators, and members of Wyoming's congressional delegation. Although the Democrats are in the legislative minority, it is unclear whether the imposition of term limits in this state would increase their numbers. The state's legislature is best characterized as amateur with relatively high turnover. Moreover, it seems that the Democrats have been successful at least in holding the governorship, which is also limited by the measure.<sup>5</sup>

Although Donovan and Snipp (1994) found gender differences in their analysis of a term limits initiative in California, none were found in this analysis, with the possible exception of Florida.<sup>6</sup> One can speculate that women in these states may have been exposed to information that suggested they would benefit from term limitations. At a national level, however, unlike the Republican Party, women's groups have not been vocal in their support for term limitations. In the absence of such cues, even highly educated and politically aware women are no more likely to support term limits. Similarly, the potential loss of clout does not appear to directly shape opinions on term limitations.<sup>7</sup> Such a theme, however, was emphasized in a few states where term limits initiatives faced serious opposition. In these states, support for term limits on members of Congress was significantly lower, suggesting that such information may have influenced opinions. Together, these findings suggest that self-interest is likely to assume greater importance when voters are given information that outlines the costs and benefits of term limits.

Finally, although the fit of the models is rather poor, such a finding is not unusual. Lowery and Sigelman (1981, pp. 970–73) and Sears and Citrin (1982, p. 176) found similar results in their analysis of the tax revolt. They concluded that the tax revolt had diffuse support because its supporters played on the public's growing disenchantment with government by emphasizing such antigovernment themes as "those lying politicians." It seems reasonable to conclude that term limitations for legislators is an idea that evokes the same kinds of beliefs.

5. The last time a Republican won the governorship was 1970.

6. Donovan and Snipp's model lacks a measure of cynicism or dissatisfaction with the state legislature. They note that such a measure, if it were available, might mediate these effects (1994, p. 499).

7. An interaction between clout and political knowledge was tried but was not significant.

## Appendix

### Question Wording and Coding

#### CYNICISM (NES AND WYOMING MODELS)

Cumulative scale summarizing responses to the following questions:

"How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?" - 1 = just about always, most of the time; 0 = don't know; 1 = some of the time, never.

"Would you say the government in Washington is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" - 1 = for the benefit of all; 0 = don't know; 1 = few big interests.

"Do you think the people in the federal government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?" - 1 = not very much; 0 = some, don't know; 1 = a lot.

"Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government in Washington are a little crooked, not very many are crooked, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?" - 1 = hardly any; 0 = not many, don't know; 1 = quite a few.

#### CYNICISM (FLORIDA MODEL)

"How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington, D.C., to do what is right?"

#### POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Cumulative scale summarizing correct responses to the following questions:

"What job or political office does Dan Quayle hold?"

"Which party is more conservative?"

"Who has the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not . . . is it the President, the Congress, the Supreme Court, or don't you know?"

"Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before this election?"

#### CLOUT OF CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION

Cumulative scale summarizing the number of party leaders and chairmanships held in the 102d Congress. For example, Michigan's delegation includes Sen. Riegle, chairman of Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs; Rep. Davis, ranking member of Merchant Marines and Fisheries; Rep. Ford, chairman of Education and Labor; and Rep. Dingell of Energy and Commerce. Based on this scale, Michigan is coded as 11. States whose members do not chair any full

committees in either the House or Senate are coded as 0. 7 = speaker; 6 = majority leaders; 5 = minority leaders; 4 = chair of exclusive committee: Appropriations, Ways and Means, Finance, Budget; 3 = chair of standing full nonexclusive committee; 2 = ranking member of exclusive committee; 1 = ranking member of nonexclusive committee.

#### NES MODEL

**Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. Congress has been handling its job?** 1 = strongly disapprove; .5 = disapprove; 0 = no opinion; -.5 = approve; -1 = strongly approve.

Do you approve or disapprove of the way your Representative (name) is handling his or her job?

#### FLORIDA MODEL

How would you rate the job the Florida legislature in Tallahassee is doing?

#### WYOMING MODEL

Please rate the job the following public officials are doing. Is their performance excellent, good, fair, or poor? 1 = poor; .5 = fair; 0 = no opinion; -.5 = good; -1 = excellent.

Wyoming governor Mike Sullivan?

"Congressional delegation" is a cumulative index based on the following questions: U.S. Senator Malcolm Wallop? U.S. Senator Alan Simpson? U.S. Congressman Craig Thomas? members of the state legislature?

What about Wyoming legislators? How do you think they have performed in recent years?

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