

# Free research paper on term limits

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The Congress of the United States has been accused of being out of touch with the American people. There are many reasons that this might be the case. One such reason is the lack of term limits placed on members of Congress. (Bennett, 2012) This allows members to become congressmen or Senators and slowly assimilate into the culture of Washington DC. Many representatives spend more of their years in office in Washington than in the areas they are supposed to represent. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) Often times, these individuals are reelected on name recognition, or party affiliation rather than on individual merit. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) Often The House of Representatives has a unique problem. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) Since terms are only two years, and a full election cycle is nearly one and one-half year, a congressman has to spend the majority of their term seeking reelection. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) This presents a number of problems. First, a lot of time must be spent raising money for the next election, rather than doing that which they were elected to do. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) Only after several such elections can a member of the House of Representatives begin to focus on their job. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) By their 5th or 6th term, they can rely on name recognition to get by in the primaries, and focus a bit longer on their work. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) Unfortunately, by the time they reach this plateau, they have been fully acclimated to the environment of Washington DC, and are therefore less able to fulfill their elected function. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994)

The environment of Washington DC is factionalized power struggle. Every issue is a zero-sum game with one political party “ winning” and one “

losing". (Bennett, 2012) A member of Congress cannot help being caught up in this dynamic because their level of success or failure within it is the basis from which their political party offers them financial support for the next election cycle. (Bennett, 2012) The poisonous atmosphere does nothing to enable the accomplishment of common goals and in fact has the opposite effect at times. (Bennett, 2012) The recent battles over the debt ceiling illustrate that inter-party bickering about an unrelated health care law jeopardized the credit rating of the United States. (Bennett, 2012) The substance of the debt ceiling being raised was one that practically no one was against, yet it almost managed to cripple our economy, and the rest of the world's, simply because partisan member of Congress refused to even vote on a bill that concerned the debt ceiling and nothing else. (Bennett, 2012)

One solution to this problem would be to raise the term of a member of the House to three or four years, and limit members to two terms. This has a dual benefit: it saves the Member from spending their entire time in office getting re-elected, which makes members beholden to the political parties themselves and it gives the electorate the impetus to get a new set of people in Congress. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) With congressional approval ratings holding at about 10%, it should strike a person as odd that the same people keep getting elected. The truth is, in the most recent election, only a net change with respect to the parties of two seats out of 434 occurred. (Bennett, 2012) Individually, only about 75 seats changed hands in the course of election. (Bennett, 2012) While several more members retired, only about 75 of 435 representatives lost their re-election bids. (Bennett,

2012) Coupled with the very low approval rate, this suggests that the elections are not really representative of what the public wants. (Bennett, 2012) Part of the reason for this is the atmosphere of unchangeability in the House of Representatives. If a candidate comes in wanting to make major changes, they have only a few short months before having to court favor from their political party and their constituents before re-election. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994) Term limits would prevent this atmosphere from forming. Even if they were rotated, there would be no one with more than 8 years experience in a given Congress. (Reed & Schansberg, 1994)

The Senate has a different set of problems. Their terms are for six years, so they do not have to spend most of their first term focused on reelection. (Bennett, 2012) The activities are therefore less hurried and less influenced by trends in popular opinions. However, Senators would also be less beholden to political parties if they did not have to worry about reelection. Limiting senators to two terms would both reduce the effect of reelection pressures and the sense of seniority that is of such importance in the senate. (Bennett, 2012)

Such changes would necessarily alter the power structure in Congress. Rather than being selected by the dominant party based largely on seniority, committee chairs and members could be selected based on their pre-election occupations or fields of study. This would create the unusual circumstance of committee members actually knowing a bit about the subject of their committees. This would make them much better able to draft legislation that makes sense outside of Washington DC.

Some would argue that term limits would remove accountability from

Congress. That is, worry about reelection would keep them from straying too far from their constituencies' needs. (Bennett, 2012) As valid as that seems in theory, in practice, this does not seem to be the case. With a 10% approval rating, about 80% of Congress is reelected anyway, owing to the short memories, or party loyalties of the population. (Bennett, 2012) One solution this conundrum would be the institution of recall elections at the federal level. (Bennett, 2012) Upon the presentation of a petition with the appropriate number of constituents, a Congressman or Senator may be recalled by the people who voted them in, without having to worry about the financial and temporal strains involved in reelection. (Bennett, 2012)

The last federal office to be considered is the presidency. The President of the United States is already limited by the Constitution of the United States to two terms. (Bennett, 2012) However, the President still spends fully one half of his first term securing reelection. If the President were limited to one 6 to 8 year term, and subject to recall as congress would be, he could be more effective at his job. (Bennett, 2012)

Much of the dysfunction in Washington is caused by the two-party system. The parties have become entities to themselves, and individuals, in order to participate properly in the democratic process, have to choose between one or the other. The problem with this lies with the fact that very few issues have only two sides, and those who advocate logical solutions to problems are often shouted down by extremists on both sides. By forcing the electorate to choose between two extremes, the political parties force the public to choose the lesser of two evils instead of the best person for the job.

While term limits would not solve the underlying problems facing modern American Government, they would tend to reduce the abuses perpetrated by the government in attempting to protect Congressional exclusivity and privileges. For example, any law benefitting members of congress would take effect only after the next term, when a majority of the people there will not have voted for it. Congress would be unable to vote themselves pay raises and the like.

In order to solve the larger problems of political deadlock and a lack of thrust in the government, large measures need to take place. The two-party system under which this nation has been governed needs to change. Other democratic nations such as Israel and Japan have survived on a multi-party system for many years. Such a system would require voters to put more thought into who they send the Washington, and force those who are sent to act as individuals, rather than members of a political party.

A multi-party system coupled with term limits would force electors to choose legitimately well-rounded candidates. By taking the stigma of “ party-jumping” away, these people would be free to exercise their own judgment without worrying about party, reelection or any other irrelevant consideration.

## **Work Cited**

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