

# Cities 101 -- Term Lengths and Limits



## Term Lengths

The most common (roughly 50 percent of localities) mayoral and councilor term length is four years. When adding municipalities that have mayoral/councilor terms of 2 years, that covers approximately 80 percent of cities and towns.

## Term Limits

Although voters nationwide imposed term limits for state legislatures in the 1990s, most of those efforts did not extend to municipal terms of office. Only a small percentage of cities (roughly 15 percent) limit the mayoral and/or councilor terms and even those states (such as California) often are focused more on successive terms in office. Importantly, term limits at both the state and local level vary by state with little discernable pattern by state size, population, or geography.

In general, views on term limits tend to rely on the following lines of argument. First, term limits may reduce potential abuses of power by



incumbents who stay too long in office. Also, limits encourage political participation by newcomers. Conversely, the election process itself already serves as the antidote for long-serving officials who are no longer responsive to citizens. Moreover, term limits are an infringement on the democratic process, as citizens are restricted from selecting a candidate they may see as the most qualified for the position. Below, these and other arguments are assessed in more detail.

## **Arguments and Counter-Arguments Supporting and Opposing Term Limits**

### **Favoring Term Limits**

- 1) Term limits increases the ratio of competitive elections. In theory, with more term limits, more elected officials must leave office with greater regularity creating open seats where no incumbent is seeking reelection.
- 2) Term limits curbs the influence of lobbyists. As a practical matter, those who contribute to political campaigns often are providing funds to multiple candidates running for the same office. Because political campaigns often cost so much, even at the local level, money and at least the appearance of influence are intertwined with governance. Campaign spending, as it is practiced following the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizen's United*, remains the most controversial aspect of the American electoral process to date competing only with moves to limit ballot access to those in possession of a specific state-sanctioned identification card.
- 3) Term limits will produce a citizen legislature of more ordinary people rather than full-time politicians. In such a circumstance, term-limited representatives would be more in harmony with public opinion and with their districts' constituents. One criticism of this argument is that once successfully elected, officials in office have a tendency to move between offices at the municipal, county, state, and federal levels. Moreover, professional



government staff members often seek to follow in the footsteps of their former bosses who vacate one office for another.

4) Term limits will promote fresh ideas. While it is true that new office holders often bring a fresh perspective and are not necessarily wedded to the status quo, there is no guarantee that the newly elected official will be any more successful at promoting a new approach than was their predecessor.

### Opposing Term Limits

1) Term limits result in a loss of experience. Question: what is the value of experience? The nation's highest office, The President of the United States, is term limited. Why then are less senior positions in need of more indispensable people?

As a practical matter, elected officials have turned to professional managers to augment their roles as decision makers. These savvy professionals are schooled in the operation of government and the management of finances. Is this model of governance, practiced in over half of all cities, the best solution or will the term limited (and thus inexperienced leaders) fall easy prey to permanent staff, bureaucrats, and other special interests?

2) Term limits remove popular leaders and are thus undemocratic. While this may be true does this in turn mean that no one else replacing existing leaders can be popular? Are individuals more important than the system? And if so, what does that say about the system?

3) Term limits negatively affect the types of projects that elected leaders implement and the continuity of those projects. Arguably, this depends on the types of project involved and whether they are of the type that will or will not be supported by a successor. This also is a relevant issue even when term limits are not involved as projects require not only mayoral leadership but also council funding.

# Sources

Moulder, Evelina. "Municipal Form of Government: Trends in Structure, Responsibility, and Composition." In *The Municipal Year Book*, 2008. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 2008.

Fahim, Mayraj. "Arguments for and against term limits." *City Mayors Government*, November 2008.

<http://www.citymayors.com/government/term-limits.html>