



Should Congress Have Term Limits?

The 22nd Amendment says presidents can be elected to no more than two four-year terms. Congress passed the amendment in 1947—a couple of years after President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s four-term presidency ended—and states ratified it in 1951. But there are no restrictions on how long members of Congress can serve, and many have held their seats for decades. Now, Republicans are sponsoring bills in the House and Senate to amend the Constitution to impose congressional term limits.

Here, one of the bill’s sponsors debates a political scientist about the proposal.

Long Careers in Congress

SENATE	HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
 51 years All-time longest serving member of the Senate: Robert Byrd, D, WV (1959-2010)	 60 years All-time longest serving member of the House of Representatives: John Dingell, D, MI (1955-2015)
 42 years Longest currently serving member of the Senate: Patrick Leahy, D, VT (1975-present)	 52 years Longest currently serving member of the House of Representatives: John Conyers, D, MI (1965-present)



YES

Americans increasingly see Washington, D.C., as a “swamp” filled with career politicians and unaccountable bureaucrats and lobbyists. In order to change the way Washington works, we must change the incentives for the players inside that swamp, particularly members of Congress. To do this, we need to institute congressional term limits.

To that end, I have introduced a constitutional amendment limiting House members to three two-year terms, and senators to two six-year terms.

A recent Rasmussen poll found that Americans on both sides of the political aisle overwhelmingly favor term limits. The Founding Fathers intended those on Capitol Hill to be citizen legislators working in the best interests of their constituents, not a class of political elites focused primarily on keeping themselves in office.

Term limits would change priorities in Washington by putting an expiration date on each member’s **tenure**. No longer would they need to operate by the rules of the

swamp to survive politically. Instead, their new primary incentive would be to achieve **tangible** results. With a fixed number of terms, members would be focused on making their limited time in office matter.

Under our current system, leadership positions are often given to those with seniority or fundraising prowess, not necessarily to those most qualified.

Members of Congress with passion and expertise on policy issues have to wait years until they are able to serve in a leadership position and make significant legislative changes. Term limits would also allow the best-qualified lawmakers

to rise to the top more quickly. This would give reformers and issue experts the opportunity to produce more-effective legislation.

We don’t have to be beholden to the ruling elite who currently inhabit the swamp. Term limits would restore government accountability to Washington and return government to the hands of the people. •

—CONGRESSMAN RON DESANTIS
Republican of Florida

**The Founding
Fathers wanted
lawmakers to be
citizen legislators.**

NO These are **perilous** times for American democracy. We face relentless attacks on a free press, challenges to the rule of law, and legitimate concerns over whether Congress will fulfill its constitutional responsibility to hold the president accountable to the laws and norms of the office he holds.

Under these extraordinary circumstances, amending the Constitution to limit the terms of members of Congress would be unwise and distracting.

The idea of congressional term limits is often hauled out as a solution for whatever discontent the public has with Congress—and the government in general. The first advocates for term limits were the Anti-Federalists, who in 1787 used the absence of term limits in the Constitution as an argument against ratifying it. Fortunately, they lost that fight, and our democratic republic has grown and thrived for 230 years.

In the 1990s, almost two dozen states adopted term limits in their state legislatures, hoping to reduce the influence of special interests, increase turnover, and make legislators more accountable. But the scholarly **consensus**

is that state legislative term limits did more harm than good. Six states subsequently repealed them.

The case for term limits is a bit stronger in the executive branch, where one person—whether the president or a governor—can amass too much personal power after years in office. But legislatures are where our nation’s laws and

budgets are written. Doing that requires a level of experience and institutional knowledge that only comes from having served for a number of years.

Turnover in Congress is already very high: Usually over the course of a decade, at least half the members of the House

and Senate are replaced. Some voluntarily retire and others are voted out. About once a decade—most recently in 2010—we see an election in which the political winds shift and many incumbents are swept out of office. The 2018 midterm elections will provide the public ample opportunity to express their views on Congress and to get rid of lawmakers they’re not pleased with. There’s no need for term limits. •

—THOMAS E. MANN

The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

Writing laws requires experience that only comes from many years of service.

HE JUST KEEPS
RUNNING, AND
RUNNING AND
RUNNING...

