

For Smaller Government, Elect Shorter Lawmakers: Caroline Baum

Feb. 4 (Bloomberg) -- The Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives is promising to cut \$100 billion from domestic spending this year. The Tea Party caucus's response? I'll see your \$100 billion and raise you \$2.4 trillion over 10 years.

Both groups are barking up the wrong tree or, to use a more appropriate animal analogy, putting the cart before the horse. The road to real deficit reduction, not a cosmetic nip and tuck, runs through term limits. If Americans are truly interested in shrinking the size of government -- one of the takeaways from the 2010 midterm election -- they can start by limiting the amount of time lawmakers are allowed to serve.

This would require a constitutional amendment (see *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton*, 1995), no mean feat, requiring as it does approval by a two-thirds majority in Congress. But not impossible either. Recent events in the Middle East demonstrate just how potent people power can be.

Would it surprise you to learn that newbies in Congress (those who have served six years or less in the House and 12 or less in the Senate) are more likely to vote for fiscal restraint than veteran lawmakers? Or that this finding was based on votes taken from 1995 through 1998, when Republicans controlled both houses of Congress? Even Newt Gingrich's class of '94, determined to shrink the size and scope of government, couldn't buck the Old Guard, according to the results of this Cato Institute study.

Shrunken Egos

In the last two years, the spending increases in bills proposed by freshman House Democrats were 60 percent lower than those sponsored by their more senior colleagues, according to Peter Sepp, vice president for communications at the National Taxpayers' Union. The GOP freshmen proposed 15 percent more cuts in spending than the old-timers.

It turns out the old adage is true: The longer they stay, the more they spend. It's what political scientist James L. Payne calls "The Culture of Spending," the title of his 1991 book.

"What goes on is a socialization process: a nicer way of saying indoctrination," Payne said in a telephone interview. "One is surrounded by people who have a biased reason for arguing that federal spending is good, necessary, wise and proper. There's no reason for anyone to enter this process if he believes it's unwise or unethical."

Clearly the Paul family, father Ron and son Rand, stands out as an exception.

Payne v. Baum

Payne, an independent researcher in Sandpoint, Idaho, challenged my premise that spending is the surest route to re- election. If spending were motivated by an attempt to buy votes, then lawmakers who announce they're retiring 18 months before the election would demonstrate a pattern of greater fiscal restraint, according to Payne.

"They don't," he said. "The election does not drive spending," which is why long-serving congressmen from electorally safe districts are profligate spenders as well.

So that's why the late Robert Byrd, who represented West Virginia for half a century in the Senate, has 33 roads, bridges and buildings named after him.

While Payne upended my notion that lawmakers' spending is driven by a desire to ingratiate themselves with key constituencies, I'm happy to report his research supports my conclusion. Term limits would ensure a regular flow of new blood. New blood is less tainted than old blood when it comes to the culture of spending.

Lifetime Employment

From 1964 to 2008, the incumbency rate in the House of Representatives averaged 93 percent, according to the Center for Responsive politics, a non-partisan independent research group tracking money in politics. Even in a wave election like the 2010 midterms, where the GOP picked up 63 House seats, the re- election rate was 86 percent, the lowest since 1948.

So yes, Virginia, we have created a permanent ruling class, something the Founders feared. James Madison worried that without term limits, legislators would serve their narrow self- interest at the expense of the national interest. He was right.

Whether Payne is correct and the culture of Washington drives spending, or Baum's theory of pay-to-play is operative, term limits are the solution. As it now stands, the only lawmakers who self-limit their term of office are the ones who support term limits. That leaves us with lifers and losers.

Cut My Benefit?

Our elected representatives see a steady stream of constituents traipsing through their offices with requests for government largesse. Aunt Gertrude can't pay her medical bills. Uncle Roger watched his home and office succumb to a tornado. Cousin Vinny lost his home to foreclosure.

Like most human beings, lawmakers want to help. So they blithely vote for more spending because, quite simply, if they don't put their hand in the cookie jar, someone else will.

When was the last time a constituent walked into his congressman's office and asked for cuts in popular government programs? Unless you believe in fairy tales, a prerequisite for smaller government is short-term legislators.

(Caroline Baum, author of "Just What I Said," is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are her own.)

--Editors: Steve Dickson, James Greiff

Click on "Send Comment" in sidebar display to send a letter to the editor.

To contact the writer of this column: Caroline Baum in New York at cabaum@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this column: James Greiff at jgreiff@bloomberg.net