

FLAPOL

Addressing term limits haters

Nick Tomboulides

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What is it about the words “term limits” that irritates so many in Florida’s political class?

Have term limits ruined our governorship?

No. They’ve given us a young and energetic Governor who is held in high regard by voters across the political spectrum.

What about our state Legislature? Have term limits messed that up?

Not according to rankings of states. The nonpartisan Mercatus Center says Florida is the most fiscally healthy state in America and the Cato Institute says we’re the freest. Meanwhile, states without term limits — and Congress, of course — are fiscally troubled, to say the least. According to the Census Bureau, Florida leads the nation in population growth. Nearly 1000 people move here every day thanks to our stewardship.

The people of Florida don’t object, of course. A whopping 77 percent of our voters cast a ballot to term limit the legislature to eight consecutive years and now 82 percent say they want eight-year limits on school boards. So why do the insiders grouse and grumble about this idea? An idea as old as democracy itself. Ancient Greek and Roman assemblies had term limits.

Term limits are a bitter pill to swallow for lobbyists and special interests because they prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that common sense — not decades in power nor number of gray hairs — is still the most valuable asset in politics. When we passed term limits statewide in the 90s, we de-professionalized politics. That brought with it a humbling effect. Professors, pundits and politicians were shocked to learn that janitors, teachers and restaurateurs could do a better job in elected office.

Because term limits transfer power away from the political elite and back to citizens — as our founders intended — they’ve never been easy to digest for those who make a living off the taxpayers.

When 3,625,500 Floridians cast a ballot for term limits on Nov. 3, 1992, they selected a simple but powerful formula: eight consecutive years, modeled after the presidency. After all, folks with common sense wondered, how on earth could any politician need more time to do his job than the leader of the free world?

Citizens loved the concept so much, that they started emulating what had taken place at the state level and brought it home to the local level. They bought clipboards, printed petitions and pounded the pavement to collect signatures. A majority of charter counties mobilized and successfully passed term limits for their commissions. Petitions for limits on city councils and commissions soon followed. Now eight of the 10 largest cities in Florida have term limits for their own offices too.

Pundits smirked and snickered but the people behind these initiatives knew exactly what they were doing: putting a check on incumbency, making elections competitive and bringing fresh ideas into the process. Before term limits getting passed in Florida, we routinely saw years where more than half of all state legislative elections were canceled, due to a lack of challengers for incumbents. And with good reason.

Any average Joe has enough common sense to realize that running for office against an incumbent is no walk in the park and that incumbency has its perks; every lobbyist wants to be your friend, every reporter wants to hear from you first and every time there's an inside scoop, you knew about it yesterday.

That status quo never empowered voters; it disrespected them. We have real, meaningful elections today because of term limits.

This enthusiasm for citizen leadership never abated. In fact, it is so strong today that there is a grassroots movement underway to bring eight-year term limits to all of Florida's school boards led by a bipartisan coalition of freshman and senior legislators. As a team, they strike a balance of freshness and experience that wouldn't exist if not for eight-year, consecutive term limits. They know this is a good idea because they've seen it work.

Those questioning Sen. Dennis Baxley for pushing for this reform are flat-out wrong. It takes courage to spearhead a policy based in humility, and to not only make that decision for yourself but to give every individual voter the opportunity to make that choice too. Baxley is working to establish the same eight-year consecutive term limits with which he and other lawmakers have complied. That is commendable.

There will never be a shortage of haters and naysayers who believe political expertise is the be all and end all of good government. But Florida's experiment with eight-year term limits has proved them all wrong.

Our state has thrived with a balance of new and experienced leaders. Citizens are clamoring for more term limits, and we ought to give it to them.