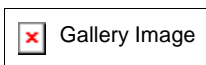




Published on *The Sierra Vista Herald* (<http://www.svherald.com>)

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Robert Carreira

One of the recommendations of the 95th Arizona Town Hall, in which I recently participated, was to end term limits or extend the terms of elected officials at the state level as a way to help solve the state's budget crisis and long-term structural deficit. As a longtime supporter of a citizen Legislature, I looked upon this recommendation with a bit of skepticism. The argument, as advanced by Town Hall participants, was that term limits prevent legislators from gaining the experience, expertise, and perspective necessary to balance the budget over the long term.

As advanced in the Town Hall recommendations, term limits undermine long-term perspectives among legislators and increase the influence of unelected legislative staff and lobbyists. "Term limits and two-year terms of legislative office foster shortsighted thinking rather than long-term vision and impede development of expertise and institutional memory," according to the recommendations. It was noted that ending term limits would help "foster a more long-term perspective and reduce the influence of ideological extremes among the state's elected representatives."

There is some logic to this proposal. Research conducted by California State University political science professor Jeff Cummins and presented at the Western Political Science Association's 2008 Annual Conference showed that states with term limits were more likely to encounter budget problems. According to the study, term limits produce inexperienced legislators who lack the necessary expertise to manage budgets with a long-term view.



Research conducted last year by Jonathan Day, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Iowa, produced similar results. In a paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association's 2008 Annual National Conference, Day noted, "term limits have increased government spending and budget deficits over non-term-limited states across time."

Similar results were published by Timothy Besley and Anne Case in MIT's Quarterly Journal of Economics in the mid-1990s. According to that study, non-term-limited elected officials care more about building their reputations and, as a result, tend to act more in concert with the preferences of their constituents.

But not everyone agrees. According to the libertarian Washington, D.C.-based think tank Cato Institute, "the inexperience-attack falls flat because ... it was the experienced, but spendthrift, politicians—not the new kids on the block—who blew the lid off the (California) state budget during the late 1990s." Other supporters of term limits have pointed to the persistent federal budget deficits, noting that U.S. representatives and senators, who are not term limited, are beholden to special interest groups who fund their re-election campaigns, which results in increased spending and a reluctance to raise taxes to pay for it.

One could argue that democracy is the ultimate form of term limits. Vote the rascals out, as the adage goes.

A criticism of that view, however, is that incumbents enjoy a distinct advantage over challengers in terms of funding, name recognition, and the ability to access the media.

Moreover, incumbents can utilize their offices — and taxpayer money — to communicate with their constituents and inform them of the progress they've made on their behalf, especially during election years.

There is an argument that democracy falls short in serving as a mechanism for change because the advantages enjoyed by incumbents may actually suppress electoral competition. According to the argument, few potential candidates will risk the cost of

candidacy in light of the overwhelming odds against them.

Regardless of one's views on term limits, overturning them in Arizona would be no easy task. Arizona voters approved term limits in 1992 by a margin of 3 to 1 with the passage Proposition 107, which amended the Arizona Constitution. But opponents of term limits have noted that several states that had passed terms limits have since repealed them.

We may soon see whether Arizona still overwhelmingly supports term limits.

According to the background report given to participants of the 95th Arizona Town Hall, Sen. Carolyn Allen, R-Scottsdale, intends to propose a bill asking Arizona voters to repeal term limits in 2010. It will be interesting to see what Arizona voters think of the perceived connection between term limits and the state's current budget crisis and whether they're willing to overturn something they so overwhelmingly supported less than two decades ago.

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