

# Assessing Legislative Term Limits in Ohio

Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics  
University of Akron

## Executive Summary

An initial assessment of legislative term limits in Ohio has produced mixed results. The citizens of Ohio strongly support term limits, much as they have in the past. Most Ohioans believe that term limits have fostered good government and helped the state. However, an in-depth look at public opinion suggests potential support for lengthening the limits from the current eight years to twelve. In contrast, Ohio leaders involved in the legislative process have a negative evaluation of term limits, a view that arises in part from the initial experience with term limits. Most leaders favor the repeal of term limits, but many would accept a twelve-year limit. Term limits have changed the Ohio General Assembly in several ways, including high turnover of members, more competitive campaigns, increased partisanship, a less efficient legislative process, and a shift in the balance of power in Ohio state government.

## The Study

This report is the product of a two-year study of the impact of legislative term limits in the Ohio General Assembly by the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at The University of Akron. It was conducted as part of the Joint Project on Term Limits, a collaboration of the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of State Governments, the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, and state legislative scholars from across the country. The Ohio portion of the study included over 50 hours of interviews with current and former legislators, staffers and knowledgeable observers; extensive review of government documents and legislative performance; and three opinion surveys (a sample of knowledgeable observers, all legislative candidates in the 2002 election; and a random sample of Ohio citizens.)

### Principal Investigators:

Dr. John C. Green (Director, [green@uakron.edu](mailto:green@uakron.edu), Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, University of Akron, Akron OH 44325-1914)

Dr. Jesse Marquette (Director, [jfm@uakron.edu](mailto:jfm@uakron.edu), Center for Policy Studies, University of Akron, Akron OH 44325-1915)

Dr. Rick Farmer (Director, [rick@rickfarmer.net](mailto:rick@rickfarmer.net), Committee Staff, Oklahoma House of Representatives, 2300 N. Lincoln Blvd, State Capitol Building Room 109, Oklahoma City, OK 73105)

Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics ([bliss@uakron.edu](mailto:bliss@uakron.edu), Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, University of Akron, Akron OH 44325-1914)

## Introduction

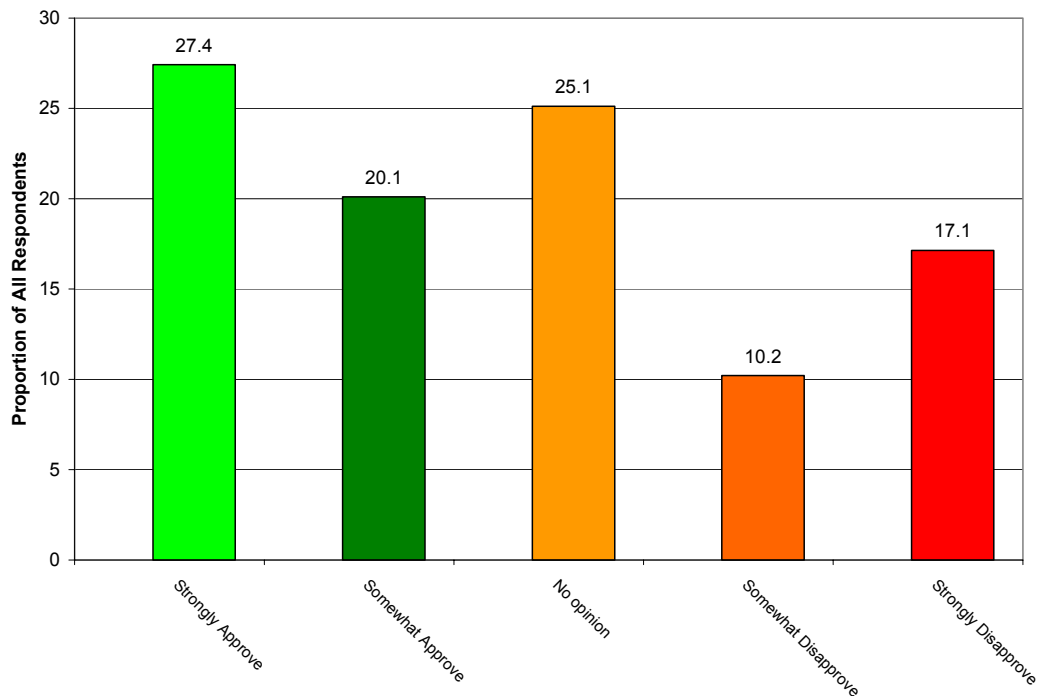
This report is an initial assessment of the impact of legislative term limits in Ohio, which first took effect in 2000. This assessment has three parts: a survey of the attitudes of Ohio citizens toward term limits; surveys of the attitudes of Ohio leaders; and information on the impact of term limits on the performance of the legislature.

### Public Attitudes on Legislative Term Limits

The citizens of Ohio approve of legislative term limits. Overall, term limits are judged to have produced good government and helped the state. However, there is potential support for extending term limits from eight to twelve years.

*Support for Term Limits.* Ohioans express strong support for legislative term limits (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Overall, 47% of Ohioans approve of term limits (27% “strongly approve” and 20% “somewhat approve”). In contrast, 27% disapprove of term limits (10% “somewhat disapprove” and 17% “strongly disapprove”). One-quarter of the respondents had no opinion on term limits.

**Figure 1. Overall Opinion On Term Limits, Ohio Citizens**



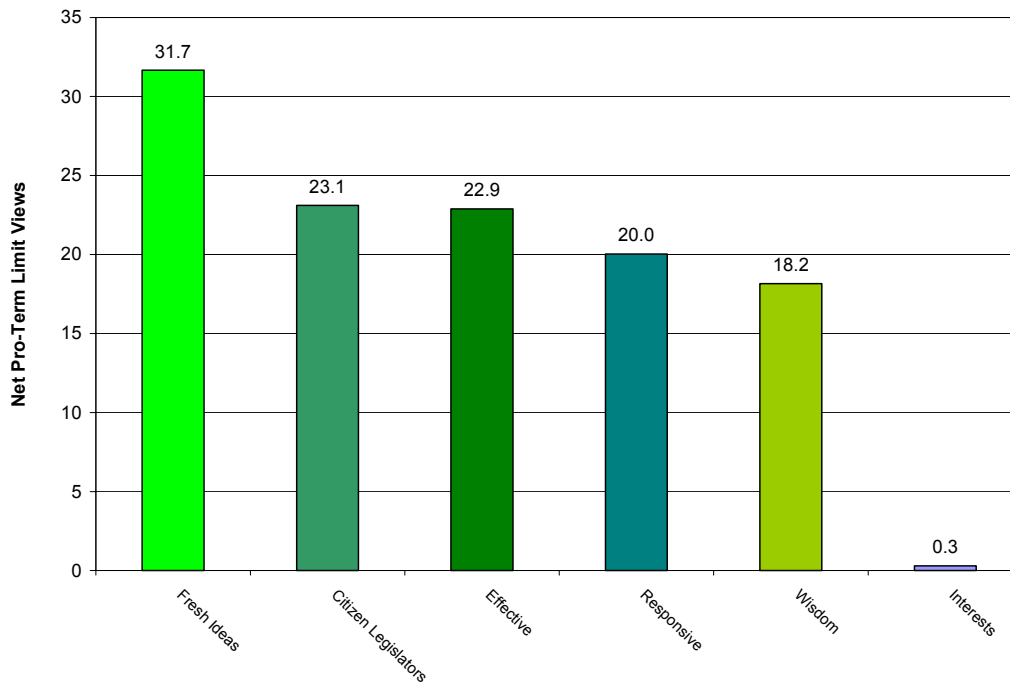
<sup>1</sup> These results are based on a state survey conducted by the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics and the Center for Policy Studies of The University of Akron in March and April, 2005. The overall sample size was 1517 respondents, comprised of a statewide sample and several regional over-samples. For this report the data set was weighted to produce a representative sample of the entire state with an error rate of less than +/- 3 % in 95 samples out of a hundred. (For more details, see [www.uakron.edu/bliss/research.php](http://www.uakron.edu/bliss/research.php)).

Put another way, 63% of Ohioans who have an opinion on the topic approve of term limits. This level of approval is consistent with the 62% support for term limits reported by the Ohio Poll in November 2001, but it is lower than the 68% of voters that initially voted to adopt legislative term limit in 1992.

*Effects of Term Limits.* In keeping with the overall approval, Ohioans largely see positive effects from term limits.

The respondents were asked their views on a series of statements about the effects of term limits on the state legislature. Figure 2 reports the net “pro-term limits” responses (calculated by subtracting the anti-term limit responses from the pro-term limit responses) in order of support.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2. Specific Impacts of Term Limits, Ohio Citizens**



On five of the six statements, Ohioans had positive views of the effects of term limits. On balance, the respondents felt that term limits brought fresh ideas into the legislature, increased the number of “citizen legislators,” had not reduced the effectiveness of the legislature, increased the responsiveness of the legislature to the public, and did not

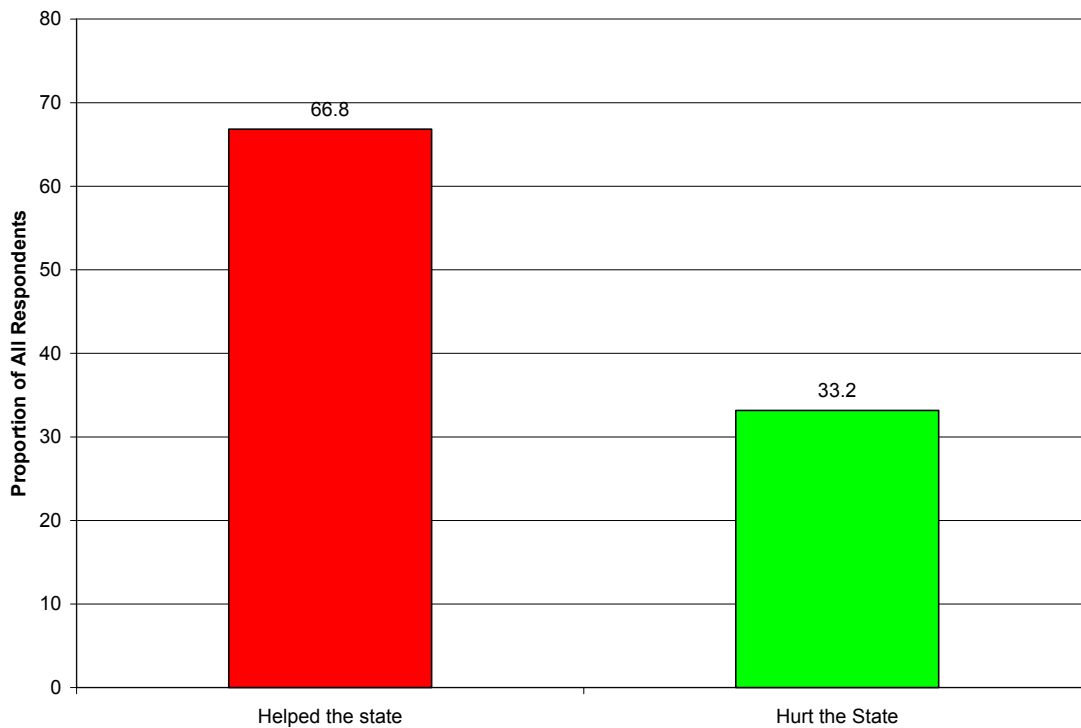
<sup>2</sup> In order to ensure that respondents paid close attention to the issues, some of the statements were phrased so that agreeing with the statement indicated approval of term limits and other statements required the respondent to disagree with the statement in order to indicate approval. The items were rotated so that all respondents did not answer the questions in the same order.

reduce wisdom and experience in the legislature. On the sixth statement, increased the power of special interests, Ohioans were almost evenly divided.

*Impact on the State of Ohio.* Ohioans overwhelmingly believe that term limits had a positive effect on the state of Ohio (Figure 3). Almost two-thirds of the respondents (66.8%) said that term limits produced “good government and helped the state,” while just one-third said that term limits produced “poor government and hurt the state” (33.2%).<sup>3</sup>

This measure of support for term limits is higher than in Figure 1 and the difference arises from the order of the survey questions. After being asked six questions about the effects of term limits, 60% of the undecided respondents expressed a positive opinion on term limits. And almost one-third of the respondents who initially disapproved of term limits also indicated an overall positive impact on the state.<sup>4</sup> These patterns suggest that public opinion on term limits is to some extent malleable when the specific impacts of the term limits are presented.

**Figure 3. Perceived Overall Effect on Term Limits, Ohio Citizens**



*Support for Term Limits and Political Views.* Public support for term limits is modestly associated with political attitudes in the public.

<sup>3</sup> These figures exclude the 11% of the sample that had no opinion. With “no opinion” included, 60% said term limits helped the state and 29% said it hurt the state.

<sup>4</sup> However, 90% of respondents with a positive view of term limits maintained their positive assessment.

Overall, Republicans are substantially more likely to approve of term limits (56%) than Independents (47%) or Democrats (43%). However, there was little difference on ideology, with liberals, moderates, and conservatives being about as likely to support term limits.

Respondents who believe Ohio is on the “right track” were more likely to support term limits (52%), while those who say the state is on the “wrong track” are less supportive (44%).

Respondents who fall in the top one-third on a scale of confidence that the state government will solve problems<sup>5</sup> are more likely to support term limits (52%), while those in the bottom third of confidence are less supportive (43%).

Respondents who rate the performance of the state legislature as “excellent” or “good” tend to support term limits (56%), but those who rate legislative performance as “poor or very poor” are less approving of term limits (43%).

*Support for Term Limits and Social Characteristics.* Public support for term limits is also modestly associated with social characteristics of the public.

A majority of respondents with at least some college education approve of term limits, with a high of 58% for college graduates. Higher income respondents are also more likely to approve of term limits, with a clear majority above \$36,000 a year. Less educated and affluent Ohioans are somewhat less approving of term limits.

A majority of respondents 35 to 54 years of age approve of term limits, with younger and older respondents approving less. Union members, women, and white born-again Christians are somewhat less approving of term limits than other Ohioans. So are African Americans, but here almost one-half reported having no opinion on the subject.

A majority of the residents of central, northwestern, and southeastern Ohio approve of term limits, but slightly less than one-half approve in northeastern and southwestern Ohio.

*Changing Term Limits.* The survey respondents were asked their views about changing term limits. Overall, 72% of Ohioans want to keep term limits as they are, while 11% support extending the term limits from eight to twelve years, and 12% want to repeal term limits.

In a follow-up question, one-third of those who did not choose a twelve-year term limit said they could accept such an extension. In total, 38% of the public would accept a twelve-year term limit for state legislators.

---

<sup>5</sup> Five policy areas were included: education, taxes, jobs, Medicare and moral issues (such as marriage and gambling).

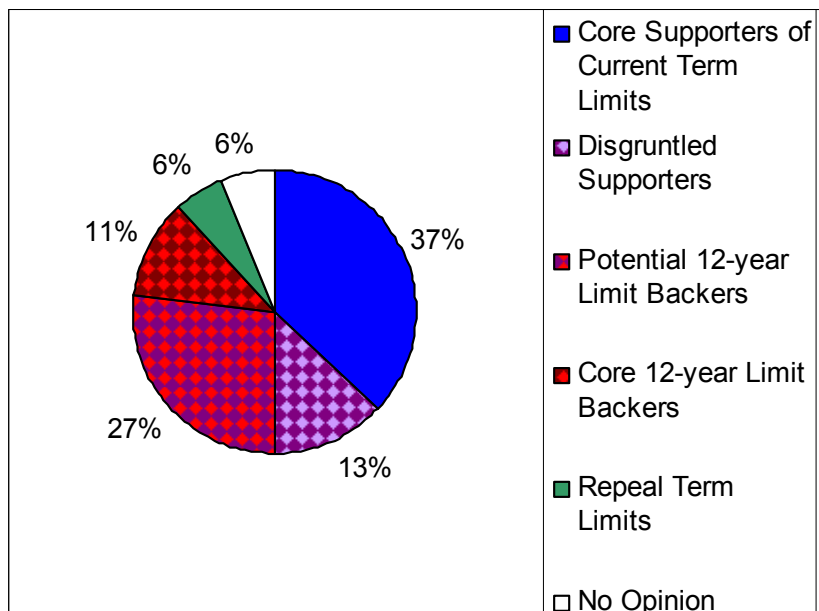
However, a more complex picture of public opinion on changing term limits emerges when these questions are combined (Figure 4). Overall, 37% of Ohioans want to keep term limits as they are and believe that term limits have been good for Ohio (“Core Supporters”). However, another 13% said they want to keep term limits, but reported belief that term limits have hurt Ohio (“Disgruntled Supporters”).

The Disgruntled Supporters may feel that term limits are not living up to their promise. For example, one-half of this group felt that term limits had not brought “fresh ideas” into government nor made the legislature more responsive to the public.

Another 27% of respondents said they would accept a twelve-year extension of term limits (“Potential 12-year Backers”). As noted above, 11% of the public support a twelve-year limit (“Core 12-year Backers”). Another 6% want term limits repealed and 6% have no opinion on the matter.

If the Potential and Core Twelve-year Backers are combined with the Disgruntled Supporters, the total comes to 51% of Ohio citizens. If those who want term limits repealed were also added, then the number grows to 57%.

**Figure 4. Views on Changing Term Limits, Ohio Citizens**



This more detailed picture suggests that there is potential support for a twelve-year extension of term limits if such an extension were to be presented as an improvement to existing term limits.

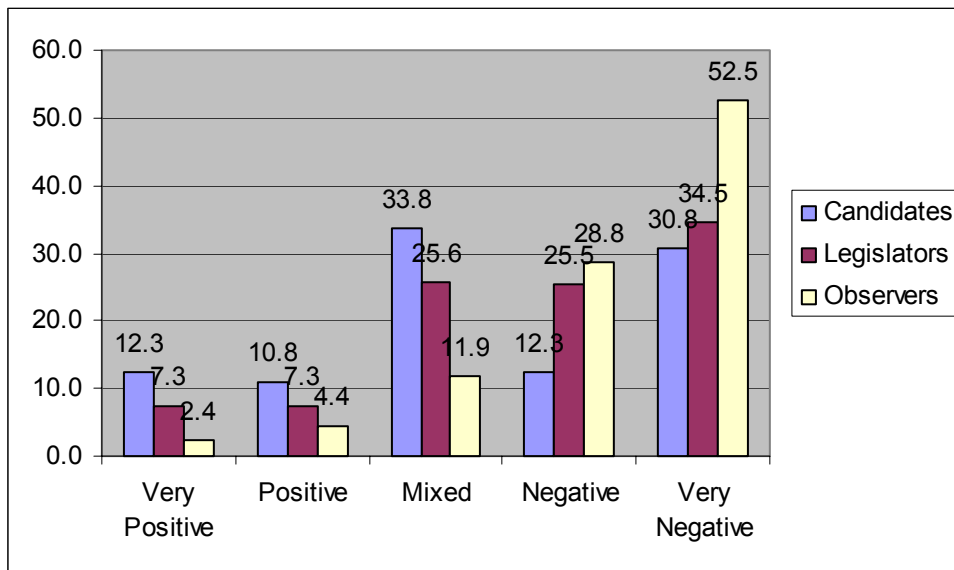
However, it is equally clear that there is no public support for repealing legislative term limits.

## Leaders Attitudes on Legislative Term Limits

Ohio leaders involved in the legislative process have a strongly negative assessment of term limits and its effects on the legislature. Drawn equally from both political parties, these leaders tend to favor repealing term limits, but many would support a twelve-year term or other alternatives. A major source of these views appears to be the initial experience with term limits.

*Support for Term Limits.* Ohio leaders are quite critical of term limits. Figure 5 reports the views of three sets of leaders: legislative Candidates, Legislators, and Observers of the state legislature (including former legislators, staff, public administrators, lobbyists and journalists).<sup>6</sup> Candidates are the least negative, with 42% disapproving of term limits, followed by Legislators, with 60% holding negative views,<sup>7</sup> and Observers, with 81% negative assessments.

**Figure 5. Evaluation of Term Limits  
Candidates, Legislators, and Observers**

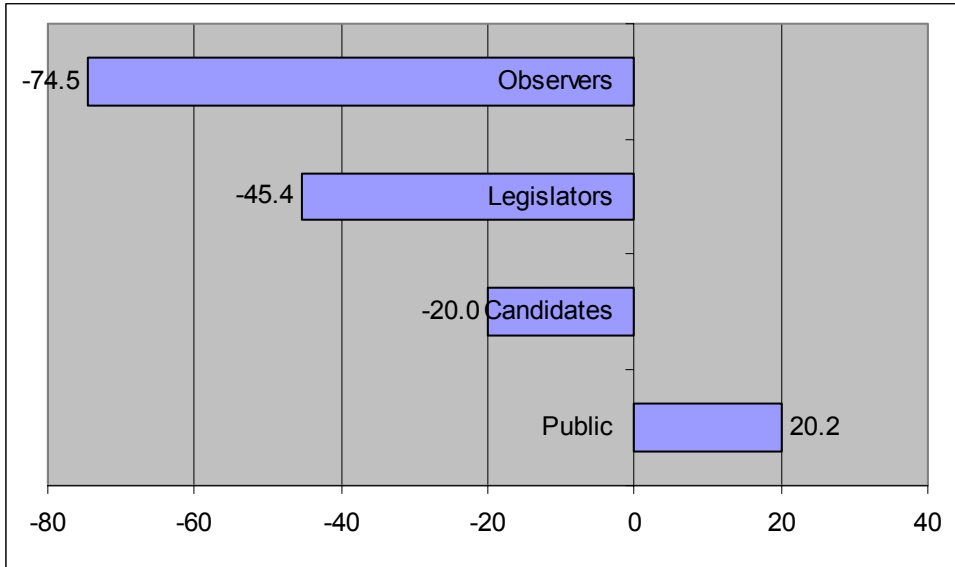


<sup>6</sup> Both surveys were completed in the spring of 2004. The Candidate and Legislator survey involved a mail questionnaire sent to all 307 state legislative candidates who ran in the 2002 election. This survey produced 121 usable responses (55 legislators and 66 non-legislators) for a return rate of 46% (excluding undelivered mail). The Observer survey involved a mail questionnaire of 1,362 former members, staff, former staff, lobbyists, and journalists. This survey produced 295 usable responses for a return rate of 29.5% (excluding undeliverable mail). Both surveys had about the same number of Democrats and Republicans.

<sup>7</sup> The 60% disapproval of term limits by the Ohio legislators surveyed is somewhat lower than the level of disapproval of term limits in national surveys of state legislators. For example, a 2003 survey by Stateline.org found 79% of legislators opposed term limits.

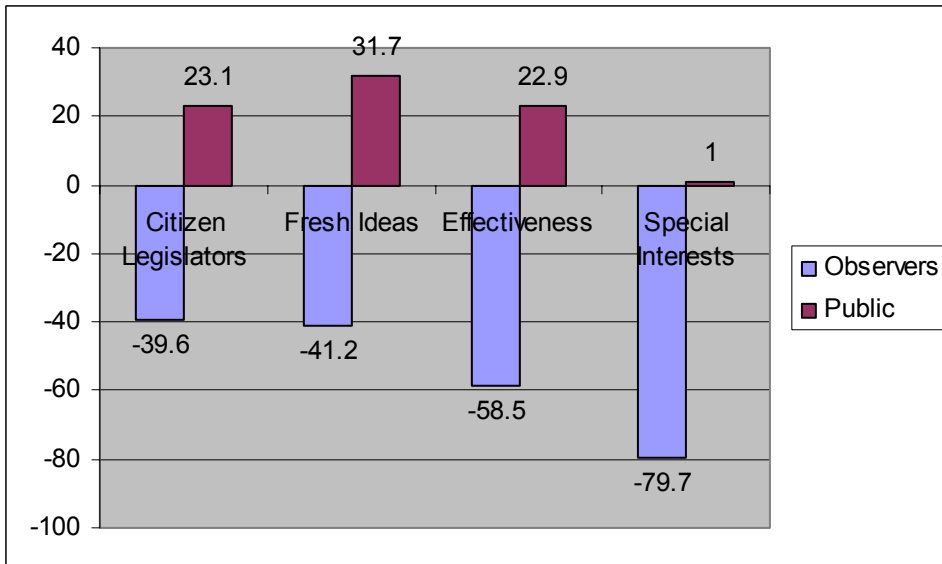
This negative view of term limits contrasts sharply with the views of Ohio citizens, as can be seen in Figure 6, which presents the net approval of term limits for all three leadership groups and the public.

**Figure 6. Net Support for Term Limits, Observers, Legislators, Candidates, and the Public**



*Effects of Term Limits.* The Observers also have a very different view of the effects of term limits than the public (Figure 7). For instance, about two-fifths of Observers disagreed on balance that term limits have brought in more citizen legislators or fresh ideas to government. And almost three-fifths of the Observers felt that the effectiveness of the legislature had declined under term limits; another four-fifths felt that the power of special interests had increased since term limits took effect.

**Figure 7. Effects of Term Limits: Observers and the Public**





The Observer survey does not include the same questions on the wisdom and experience in the legislature that were asked of the public. But other questions asked reveal a negative assessment in this area as well. Under term limits, 81% of Observers judged legislators to be less knowledgeable about the legislative process, 73% felt legislators are less concerned about clarity and precision in legislation, and 75% said legislators are less knowledgeable about state-wide issues.

However, 77% of Observers do agree that legislators are more independent under term limits. This parallels the public's view that the responsiveness to the public has not declined under term limits.

*Sources of Opposition to Term Limits.* Experience with term limits appears to be a major source of the leaders' assessment of term limits. For example, many leaders claim to have changed their minds since term limits took effect: 28% of Candidates, 33% of Legislators, and 42% of the Observers. In all cases, the change was overwhelmingly in a negative direction. For Candidates, positive evaluation declined by 63%; for Legislators by 86%; and for Observers by 93%. However, most Ohio leaders did not favor term limits when enacted by the public in 1992.<sup>8</sup>

*Changing Term Limits.* Ohio leaders strongly favor changing term limits (Figure 8). Overall, a popular option is the repeal of term limits. Roughly two-fifths of Candidates and Legislators favor repeal, and nearly three-quarters of the Observers.

However, among Legislators, extending the limit to twelve years is the most common position, held by just over two-fifths. But this option is favored by only one-sixth of the Candidates and a little more than one-quarter of the Observers.

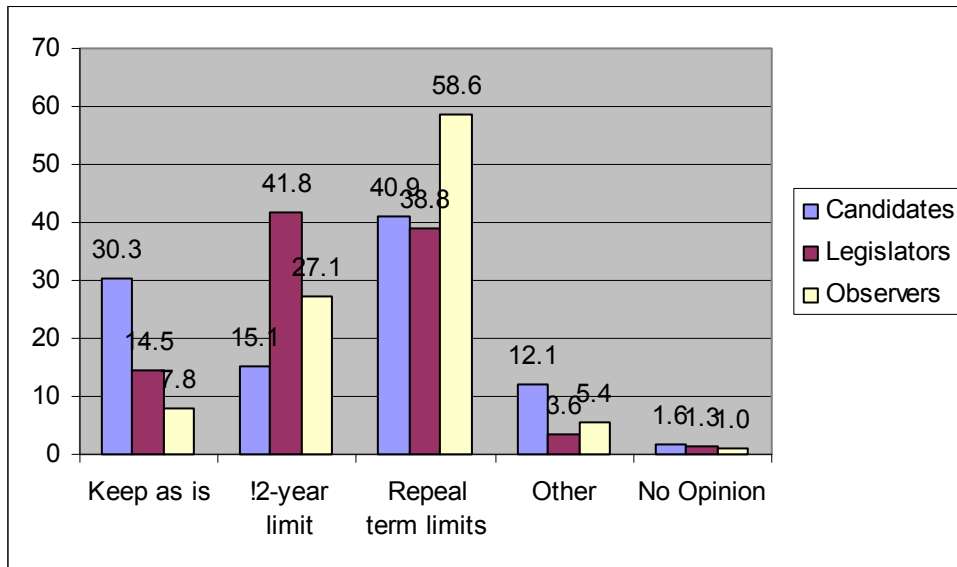
More Candidates favored keeping term limits as is (30.3%) compared to Legislators (15.1%) and Observers (7.8%). Some of these leaders offered other ideas on term limits, and a small number reported no opinion because they had not yet made up their minds on the topic.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Few other factors were associated with the leaders' opposition to term limits. Among Candidates and Legislators, neither party nor ideology produced significant differences: Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives were as likely to have a negative evaluation of term limits. Respondents from northern Ohio were the most critical, and members of the General Assembly were more so than state senators. Challengers and those in competitive races were somewhat less critical of term limits.

<sup>9</sup> Unlike the public, there was no group of Disgruntled Supporters of term limits. Leaders who disapproved of term limits overwhelmingly wanted change and vice versa.

**Figure 8. Changing Term Limits, Candidates, Legislators and Observers**



**The Impact of Term Limits on the Operation of the Ohio General Assembly**

Term limits appear to have brought a number of changes to the Ohio General Assembly, including high turnover of members, more competitive campaigns, increased partisanship, a less efficient legislative process, and a shift in the balance of power in Ohio state government.

*Turnover and Elections.* The most obvious effect of term limits has been enforced turnover of legislators. For example, 55% of the lower House members were new in 2001 and 30% in 2003. The average turnover in the 1990’s was 19%. For the senate, turnover was 27% in 2001 and 30% in 2003, compared to an average of 17% in the 1990’s.

When the Ohio General Assembly convened in January 2003, none of the 99 Representatives or 33 Senators had held his or her seat for more than 6 years. In the 1990’s, the average length of service was 21.6 years.

This dramatic change in members did not, however, change the social characteristics of legislators very much. For instance, the percentage of women (20.5%) and racial minorities (15.1%) changed very little from the pre-term-limit era. Likewise, the average age of members remained almost the same (47.8 years).

Very few “citizen legislators” have been elected under term limits, with most new members having served as elected county or municipal officials. Interestingly, term limits also had very little effect on the partisan balance in the legislature, with the number of Democratic and Republican members changing very little.

In addition, term limits has had relatively little effect on the number of members with prior experience in the House and the Senate. For example in 2003, 3% of members had served in the General Assembly prior to winning election in 2002. This figure was actually higher than the 1% before term limits took effect. This pattern appeared in a more dramatic fashion in the Senate. In 2003, 76% of senators had prior experience in the legislature before their 2002 election, more than twice the pre-term limit of 29%.

The reason for these patterns is clear: term-limited legislators from one chamber run for a seat in the other chamber—and vice versa. There is every reason to expect that this trend will continue in the future. A parallel trend is the tendency of term-limited members to resign early to allow the caucus to appoint a replacement, who then runs for election as an incumbent.

One clear effect of this turnover is an increase in competitive elections, including primaries and general elections. In 2000, 20% of the general elections for the House were won by 55% or less of the vote, and in 2002 the figure was 19%. In the 1990's, the average number of races won by less than 55% of the vote was 10.4%. For the senate, 6% of senate elections were won by 55% of the vote in 2000, and in 2002, the figure was 29%. For the 1990's, the average of competitive senate races was 7.9%.

This rise in competitive elections has had a dramatic impact on the political activity in the legislature. For one thing, the party caucuses and legislative leaders have become more deeply involved in recruiting legislative candidates, raising funds, and running legislative campaigns. The Observers report that the new candidates for office are both more partisan and more ideological than in the past, and a comparison to surveys of candidates in the 1990's supports this claim.

An important result of this intense focus on elections is that the General Assembly is more overtly partisan than in the 1990's. For example, 81% of the Observers report that the legislature is more partisan than before term limits, while only 19% say it is less so. Interviews suggest that a contributing factor is the tendency of new members to know only members of their own caucus and have little contact with members from the other party.

*Representation.* Term limits do not appear to have diminished the attention legislators pay to their constituents and may have strengthened it. For instance, the Observers report that legislators spend modestly more time communicating with their constituents and helping solve problems than before term limits took effect.

The Observers also report that post-term-limits members are more likely to stress local issues over statewide concerns (82% agreeing) and more likely follow their districts interest than their own conscience (64%). Candidate and Legislators in 2002 also agreed that the district's interest was more important than the whole state (54%) and they narrowly agreed that the district's wishes were more important than their own conscience (51%) when voting for legislation.

*Impact on the Legislative Process.* Under term limits, the Ohio General Assembly has continued to perform its constitutional functions, producing legislation at about the same rate as before the introduction of term limits. For example, the Senate passed 37% of the bills introduced in the 2001-2002 biennium compared to 34% in 1997-2000, before term limits took effect; comparable figures for the House were 29% and 28%, respectively.

However, there is considerable evidence that the General Assembly has been less efficient in achieving these results under term limits. For example, the 87% of the Observers report that the legislative process has become more “chaotic” under term limits and 85% note that the legislative process has become more “confrontational.”

The Observers report that legislators were less likely to follow legislative leaders on the floor (47% agree to 21% disagree), be courteous to other members (45% to 5%), and to follow parliamentary procedure (27% to 4%) under term limits.

In addition, the Observers note that legislative committees continue to fulfill their legislative functions under term limits. For example, bills passed by committees continue to succeed on the floor at a high rate, comparable to the 1990s.

However, the operation of the committees has been more difficult. The Observers report that committee members are less knowledgeable about the issues (77%), less willing to compromise (56%), and less courteous to fellow committee members (56%).

The Observers report that all participants in the legislative process—legislators, staff, administrative officials, and lobbyists—have to work much harder to pass legislation under term limits. The lobbyists and administrative officials interviewed were the most vocal about this concern. This increased workload is the result of personal relationships among participants in the legislative process having been disrupted by term limits.

The General Assembly is frequently criticized for the quality of the public policies it enacts. Such judgments are inherently political and may be inappropriately linked to term limits. It is worth noting, however, that 8% of the Observers believed that term limits had contributed to the enactment of innovative policies, while 86% believed that term limits had contributed to the enactment of shortsighted policies.

*Balance of Power in Ohio Government.* The Observers believe that term limits have contributed to a change in the balance of power in Ohio government, with some institutions gaining and other institutions losing influence in the legislative process.

However, interviews indicate that personality has proven more important than institutional arrangements in determining the balance of power in Ohio politics. One effect of term limits is to keep the personalities in flux.

The Observers report that lobbyists had gained the most influence under term limits, with 75% reporting an increase and 5% a decrease (with the remaining 25% noting “no change”). The partisan staff in the legislature was a close second in gaining influence

(70% to 5%), followed by the party caucuses (57% to 15%) and the personal staff of members (53% to 7%).

The Observers reported that legislative leaders as a group increased their influence slightly (36% increase to 33% decrease). But other evidence points to a greatly expanded influence for two offices, the Speaker and the Senate President. Although the Ohio General Assembly has a history of strong legislative leaders, the Speaker and Senate President have come to dominate the legislative process. Interviews note that freshmen legislators are dependent upon these leaders and their partisan staffs for policy advice. But new members tend to turn to personal staff for advice on the legislative process.

Other institutions have lost some influence under term limits, according to the Observers, including administrative agencies (33% increase and 39% decrease), legislative committees (21% to 24%), non-partisan staff (20% to 25%), and the office of the Governor (70% to 16%).