



# Policy in Practice

## Outwit, Outlast, Outplay: Who Really Got the Best Deal With Term Limits?

**T**he biggest change to hit state legislatures over the past quarter century has been the advent of term limits. In the 15 states with term limit laws—which were almost all approved through ballot initiatives by voters sick of career politicians—legislators are limited to serving no more than 6, 8, or 12 years in either the house or the senate. Although that may sound like a long time, it turns out not to be enough for most legislators to master all the complexities of understanding and formulating a wide range of policy.

Term limits have failed the public's goal of bringing in more "citizen legislators." Instead, legislators are constantly seeking their next political jobs rather than carving out decades-long careers in one chamber. Term limits also have failed to bring the anticipated and hoped-for substantial numbers of women and minorities into the legislative ranks. The total number of women legislators is up nationwide, but their ranks have actually been slower to grow in states that impose term limits.<sup>a</sup>

But if they haven't fulfilled all their promises, term limits have not been quite the disaster their opponents predicted either. One of the most common predictions—that with members serving so briefly, lobbyists hoarding institutional and policy knowledge would accrue all the power—appears to have missed the mark. Term limits

pretty much have been a mixed bag for lobbyists, who must introduce themselves to a new, skeptical set of legislators every couple of years rather than relying on cozy relations with a few key committee chairs. "I don't know one lobbyist who thinks it's a good thing," said Rick Farmer, who wrote about term limits as an academic before going to work for the Oklahoma House. "If term limits are such a good thing for lobbyists, why do so many lobbyists hate them?"

It does seem clear, however, that legislators in term-limited states have lost power to the executive branch—the governors and their staff who actually know how to operate the machinery of government. "Agency heads can outwait and outlast anyone and everyone on the playing field and they have consolidated their power," said one southern legislator-turned-lobbyist. Las Vegas Democrat Tick Segerblom says he believes it's time to give term limits the boot. "We need all the brainpower and institutional knowledge we can get, and term limits deprives us of that," he said.<sup>b</sup>

Academic studies in term-limit states, including California, Colorado, and Maine, have found that legislators make far fewer changes to governors' budgets than they used to, representing many billions of dollars in legislative discretion that is no longer exercised. "The