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The Real Lesson of the Shutdown: We Need Term Limits

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A government shutdown grips Washington, leaving Americans frustrated once again with partisan squabbling. The endless stalemates and inability to find common ground are reflective of a deeper problem: The House and the Senate are dominated by career politicians, buoyed by re-election rates that routinely exceed [90 percent](#), who seem more concerned with clinging to power than serving the public.

The time has come to put term limits on members of Congress.

In that spirit, the two of us — one a Republican and one a Democrat — will be the co-chairs of a national campaign with the organization U.S. Term Limits aimed at restoring accountability, competition and common sense on Capitol Hill.

The idea of imposing term limits is hardly novel. Indeed, our founders anticipated this problem. [The Federalist No. 57](#) notes that “limitation of the term of appointments” is the most effective method for maintaining a “proper responsibility to the people.” Some observers argue that our congressional elections already serve as de facto term limits — that if voters want to send their senators and representatives home, they can just vote them out. But the reality is that incumbents today build up overwhelming advantages, making them extremely difficult to defeat.

Incumbents routinely out-fund-raise their challengers by nearly insurmountable margins. In the 2024 election, according to [data collected by OpenSecrets](#), PACs contributed more than \$11 to congressional incumbents for every \$1 they sent to challengers.

There are additional advantages, like name recognition and the ability to send taxpayer-funded mailers, that help those already in power.

Most members of Congress are, by any reasonable definition, career politicians. In that way, Congress too often can be a self-serving closed club of political insiders looking to protect their power rather than a true forum of ideas aimed at benefiting the American public.

Some people see redistricting reform as a fix for what ails Washington. However, such reforms would do little to curb the advantages incumbents enjoy in primaries and safe districts, nor would they dismantle the seniority system that stifles innovation in Congress. Redrawing district boundaries would not erase things like name recognition and fund-raising advantages that allow incumbents to cling to power.

While the Constitution didn’t include congressional term limits, the principle of rotation was woven into early American political culture. Starting with [George Washington’s example](#) of voluntarily stepping aside after two terms, no president served more than two terms until Franklin Roosevelt broke precedent with his four elections, leading to the passage of the [22nd Amendment](#).

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If term limits are good for the presidency, why not for Congress? After all, members of Congress wield enormous influence over our lives. They write our federal laws, control our tax dollars and provide oversight of the executive branch. The concentration of power among career politicians fuels partisanship by empowering lobbyists who profit off longstanding relationships, and deepens public cynicism about government.

America has a ballooning national debt, for which both Republicans and Democrats are to blame. If you want to know why, look no further than politicians singularly focused on spending your tax dollars in ways that bolster their chances of re-election. Greater turnover would mean more politicians invested in the interests of their constituents — and the nation as a whole — over those of entrenched and influential advocacy groups. It would go a long way toward restoring trust in our political institutions and reducing the influence of money in our elections.

So how do we make this happen? There are two potential paths: Congress itself could pass term limits. In 1995, [a majority](#) of House members voted in favor of a term limits constitutional amendment, though they fell short of the required two-thirds supermajority. Members of both chambers should act again and vote to limit their own power.

If Congress refuses to act, states can take matters into their own hands through an [Article V](#) amendment-writing convention. This mechanism seems tailor-made for this scenario. It allows states to propose an amendment when Washington will not. Twelve states have already passed “[single-subject](#)” resolutions calling for term limits, more than a third of the way toward the 34 states necessary for that process to move forward, and nearly a quarter of the way toward the 38 states needed to ratify an amendment.

Neither approach would be easy, but the threat of a convention would almost certainly compel Congress to pass an amendment, making the arduous trek down either path critical to creating a more representative government. At a time when the country feels increasingly divided, this effort at reform would bring people together.

Americans are best served when their representatives bring fresh energy, new ideas and their unique backgrounds to the table for robust debate on the challenges facing our nation. We believe reaching across the aisle and leading this effort together is the first step. But on this issue, it will ultimately be up to everyday citizens making their voices heard.