

## **SHOULD WE IMPOSE TERM LIMITS ON MEMBERS OF CONGRESS?**

In the late 1980s, many reformers were concerned that the incumbency advantage enjoyed by legislators created, in effect, lifetime tenure, which served as a roadblock to change and encouraged ethics abuses. To increase turnover among legislators, these reformers proposed term limitations, generally restricting representatives to 6 or 12 consecutive years in office.

The movement to limit the terms of legislators spread rapidly across the country. Within a few years, 23 states enacted term limitations for members of their state legislatures. The House Republicans made term limits for Congress part of their Contract with America in the 1994 election. Yet changing the terms of members of Congress requires changing the Constitution, which is difficult to do, and many members of Congress have fought term limitations fiercely.

Opponents of term limitations object to the loss of experienced legislators who know the issues and the process of legislation and of the American people's ability to vote for whomever they please. In addition, they argue, there is plenty of new blood in the legislature: at the beginning of the 113th Congress (in 2013), most members of the House and Senate had served less than 10 years in Congress. Moreover, changes in the party make-up of the House appear to reflect changes in voter preferences for public policy.

Proponents of term limits suffered two setbacks in 1995 when Congress failed to pass a constitutional amendment on term limitations (it also failed in 1997) and when the Supreme Court, in *U.S. Term Limits v. Thornton*, decided that state-imposed term limits on members of Congress were unconstitutional.

Many Americans support a constitutional amendment to impose term limitations on members of Congress. At the same time, most seem comfortable with their own representatives and senators and appear content to reelect them again and again.

**What do you think? Would you favor or oppose term limits? Why? What action, if any, would you take?**