

The Founding Fathers on Term Limits

Alexander Hamilton: "Nothing appears more plausible at first sight, nor more ill founded upon close inspection [than term limits].... One ill effect of the exclusion would be a diminution of the inducements to good behavior. There are few men who would not feel much less zeal in the discharge of a duty when they were conscious that the advantage of the station with which it was connected must be relinquished at a determinate period, than when they were permitted to entertain a hope of obtaining, by meriting, a continuance of them." (The Federalist, #72)

John Adams: "There is no right clearer, and few of more importance, than that the people should be at liberty to choose the ablest and best men, and that men of the greatest merit should exercise the most important employments; yet, upon the present [term limits] supposition, the people voluntarily resign this right, and shackle their own choice.... [T]hey must all return to private life, and be succeeded by another set, who have less wisdom, wealth, virtue, and less of the confidence and affection of the people." (A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America)

James Madison: "No man can be a competent legislator who does not add to an upright intention and a sound judgement a certain degree of knowledge of the subjects on which he is to legislate. A part of this knowledge may be acquired by means of information which lie within the compass of men in private as well as public stations. Another part can only be attained, or at least thoroughly attained, by actual experience in the station which requires the use of it.... A few of the members [of Congress], as happens in all such assemblies, will possess superior talents; will, by frequent re-elections, become members of long standing; will be thoroughly masters of the public business, and perhaps not unwilling to avail themselves of those advantages. The greater the proportion of new members and the less the information of the bulk of the members, the more apt will they be to fall into the snares that may be laid for them." (The Federalist, #53)

Samuel Adams: "If ever time should come, when vain and aspiring men shall possess the highest seats in Government, our country will stand in need of its experienced patriots to prevent its ruin." (1780)

Roger Sherman: "Frequent elections are necessary to preserve the good behavior of rulers. They also tend to give permanency to the Government, by preserving that good behavior, because it ensures their re-election.... In Connecticut we have existed 132 years under an annual government; and as long as a man behaves himself well, he is never turned out of office." (From Madison's notes at the Constitutional Convention, 1787)

Gouverneur Morris: "The ineligibility proposed by the [terms limitation] clause as it stood tended to destroy the great motive to good behavior, the hope of being rewarded by a re-appointment. It was saying to him, 'make hay while the sun shines.'" (From Madison's notes at the Constitutional Convention, 1787)

Samuel Adams: "Much safer is it, and much more does it tend to promote the welfare and happiness of society to fill up the offices of Government after the mode prescribed in the American Constitution, by frequent elections of the people. They may indeed be deceived in their choice; they sometimes are; but the evil is not incurable; the remedy is always near; they will feel their mistakes and correct them." (1790)

Excerpt from: The New American / June 10, 1996

Term Limits Temptation- Creating the Pretext for a Con-Con - Written by George Detweiler