

The Effects of Term Limits on Local Contests

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Abstract

This paper examines the competitiveness of contests, and the quality of candidates, in local contests with term limits. Previous literature is divided on the subject of term limits, with research finding either negative effects of term limits, or limited positive effects. This paper hypothesizes that the quality of challengers will not increase in term limited contests, and that the competitiveness of contests will decrease for term limited offices. Using data from California, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, and Washington local contests, this paper examines approximately four hundred-fifty candidates through survey, and approximately one thousand contests. The quality of challengers does not appear to change in the presence of term limits, and incumbents do not seem more or less susceptible to defeat in term limited offices. However, this analysis finds that the vote margin of term limited contests increases in the context of incumbency and partisan contests. The implications of these findings suggest that term limits may not be worth the trouble of implementing, and may be having the opposite effect of what many term limit proponents claim. Constituent representation is possibly negatively affected by less competitive contests.

Topic and Research Plan

Proponents of term limits claim that, among other benefits, term limits bring electoral competition to offset the enormous resources of the incumbent. The push for term limits has been one the “largest grassroots movement[s] in American history,” intended to “force out career politicians” (U.S. Term Limits 2013). The *Cato Handbook for Congress* suggests that term limits can reverse the trend that has “put incumbents beyond the reach of the people” (Crane and Boaz 2003, 87). However, I argue that term limits decrease electoral competitiveness, because fewer high quality candidates challenge an incumbent during their time in office. The implication is that the purpose of term limits, to make office holders more responsive to constituents, counter intuitively makes officeholders less responsive to constituents. This suggests that states that currently have term limits imposed on local offices are actually reducing the quality of representation. The reason for this is that high quality challengers merely wait until the incumbent’s term is over, thereby creating a very *noncompetitive* election for as long as the incumbent is able to run for the seat.

This paper uses data from elections in 2010. These offices represent term limited and non-term limited offices, as well as partisan and non-partisan elections. The data on elections encompasses five states; California, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, and Washington state. The elections examined include mayor, county commissioner, city council, school board, and special districts. These data allow me to compare term limited and non-term limited offices. Contest-level data is used to determine the competitiveness of elections by incumbent turnover and vote margin, while candidate questionnaires determine the quality of candidates within contests. From these data it is possible to answer the question: *What are the effects of term limits?*

Literature Review

Term limits are widely believed to bring many benefits, among those being constituent representation, bringing in “new blood” to office, and facilitating better policy-making. These stem from perhaps the most important alleged benefit of term limits: electoral competition. Term limits are widely favored compared to alternatives that have met with some success increasing competition; including campaign contribution limits (Stratmann and Aparicio-Castillo 2007, 109), nonpartisan redistricting (Carson and Crespin 2004, 455), or public finance (Malhotra 2007, 281). Yet, term limits do not appear to accomplish what proponents claim. Previous studies on the subject discussed below find either conflicting evidence, or even negative consequences, caused by the imposition of term limits.

Political Party Benefits from Term Limits

Although the literature is not of one opinion, the prevailing opinion suggests that term limits only entrench incumbents. Lopez writes that term limits always favor Republicans, as Republicans lose reelection and win open seats more often than Democrats (Lopez 2003, 46). This line of reasoning supports the idea that Republicans calculatingly endorsed term limits in the 1990s to turn out Democrats. However, such an outlook is challenged by other scholars. Powell suggests that term limits have not given Republicans any clear advantage in state legislatures (Powell 2008, 32). In short, Powell finds that term limits have had little effect on the composition of state legislatures (Powell 2008, 43). Such a view is also supported by Schraufnagel and Halperin, who suggest that term limits have not created a diverse state legislature in Florida. Their conclusion comes after analyzing victory margins in state legislative elections from 1988-2004 (Schraufnagel and Halperin 2006, 456). In a broad examination of all fifty states, Carey supports this claim as well (Carey et al. 2006, 105). Schaffner further develops the argument, and even claims that term limits allow the majority party an even greater

ability to remain in power (Schaffner, Wagner, and Winburn 2004, 409). The consensus from many scholars points to a null effect of term limits. They do not seem to “throw the bums out,” especially in terms of party affiliation. Term limits may even strengthen a party’s hold on the legislature. Such an effect is contrary to the design of term limits.

Representation of Constituents

While being a purported benefit of term limits, their role in representing constituents is debatable. Carey argues that term limits will “undermine legislator responsiveness to the electing constituency” (Carey et al. 2006, 128). In this way, term limits isolate a legislator from the concerns and needs of their district. Carey’s view is directly challenged by Wright, who finds that legislators are “ideologically consistent in their roll call voting, even when they know they will not be running for reelection” (Wright 2007, 272). This suggests that politicians are motivated and elected by their ideological preferences, regardless of whether term limits are imposed upon their seat. With the possibility that partisanship is exerting a stronger pull on recent elections, Wright’s view does not find a disconnect between the wants of the voters and the policy decisions of the legislators (Powell 2008, 44). The dichotomy of the two interpretations of representation suggests that the issue is still undecided. Regardless, other scholars have found somewhat of a middle ground between the two views. Term limits may produce politicians whose views are closer to the median voter position. However, this applies to politicians *before* term limits are imposed, with the idea that legislators will want to appeal to a wide variety of voters so they will not vote for term limits (Chen and Niou 2005, 400-1). At best, evidence is contradictory that term limits create better representation. Clearly term limits do not function as a “cure all” for constituent responsiveness.

Policy

The effect of term limits on public policy is unclear and inconclusive, again suggesting only minor effects. Using a theoretical model, Herron and Shotts have found that term limits may increase pork barrel spending in the legislature, as politicians become more myopic (Herron and Shotts 2006, 398). Lopez suggests that, because “term limits weaken electoral sorting mechanisms,” political fiscal policy will be more volatile and lead to “legislative shirking” (Lopez 2003, 46).

In a study that supports positive policy effects of term limits, and in one of the rarer studies on municipal offices and elections, McGlynn and Sylvester suggest the term limited mayors run a city more efficiently. According to the authors, this is because term limited mayors are not as concerned with reelection and patronage. Still, they conclude that term limits have “a limited effect on fiscal policy in U.S. cities” (McGlynn and Sylvester 2010, 128). On a more general level, Apollonio suggests that the quantity of bills introduced in the legislature is not affected by term limits (Apollonio 2006, 274).

The literature suggests negative fiscal effects associated with term limits, or limited positive effects. While these views cannot be entirely reconciled, it may be that term limits are more beneficial for public policy at the municipal level, and more detrimental at the legislative level. Perhaps term limits decrease entry barriers at the local level, but increase entry barriers at the more visible legislative level. However, not enough research has been done on the topic to make this assumption. Regardless, McGlynn and Sylvester’s research is unique in that it focuses on local elections, but they do not study term limits’ effects upon the types of candidates campaigning for office.

Career Ambition

Another failure of term limits, career ambition for many legislators is not halted after their term is expired. As a whole, Lazarus finds that term limits do not stop a politician from seeking a political career (Lazarus 2006, 378). Adding on to that, Tothero discusses in his study that, when term limited out of office, several members of the Michigan House of Representatives chose to run for local offices. In this way, the politicians were able to continue their political careers if a vertical political move was impossible or undesirable (Tothero 2003, 121-2). If a state legislator is more likely to win a local seat than other candidates is unclear. Again, term limits appear to fall short of their intended consequences. If they are designed in part to “throw the bums out,” they are not doing so in a consistent manner.

Electoral Competition

Divided opinions in the literature regarding electoral competition suggests that term limits' benefits are limited. One conclusion is that the reduction of entry barriers, in an effort to equalize incumbent and challenger campaign spending, is merely a redundancy to properly designed campaign finance reform (Lopez 2003, 46). This view is supported by Powell, who finds that the change in partisan turnover in the legislatures of states with term limits is not different from those without term limits (Powell 2008, 43). Schraufnagel and Halperin summarize by claiming that term limits have not increased electoral competition (Schraufnagel and Halperin 2006, 456). Carey also supports this view, in that term limits have no effect upon the types of people elected to office (Carey et al. 2006, 105).

Other scholars disagree, or examine competition from a more candidate-centered approach. Lazarus discusses that “politically experienced candidates are much more likely to be successful in running for [state legislature] than inexperienced candidates.” He also examines another factor that needs to be considered in terms of competition: “whether the experienced

candidate left his or her last-held public office. If the departure was involuntary, the candidate may be less likely to win an election than others with similar experience” (Lazarus 2006, 378). Lazarus suggests that the quality of challengers can matter in term limited elections. Powell agrees with this sentiment, in that term limits would lead to minority party gains if the minority party was able to “field replacement candidates of equal or better quality than its own term limited incumbents” (Powell 2008, 43). The limiting factor in this case for Powell is how often minority parties are able to do this at the state legislative level. Still, Steen has found evidence that term limits in state legislatures increase the supply of high quality challengers for U.S. Congress (Steen 2006, 442-3). Nonetheless, it is unclear if the same effect is applicable for county and sub county offices. Research also suggests that, with the imposition of term limits, lobbyists are fueling more money into a candidate’s campaign as they run for the legislature (Richardson 2005, 189). Tothoro supports Richardson’s claim, providing research that suggests lobbyists are providing money to candidates at the local (sub-legislative) level (Tothoro 2003, 122). Whether this money makes certain candidates more competitive in an election is unclear. Although Schraufnagel and Halperin do not find that term limits increase competition, they also find that “political operatives in the state go out of their way to secure a replacement with previous political experience” in a term limited open seat (Schraufnagel and Halperin 2006, 457). Whether this factor decreases competition when the incumbent is running for reelection in a term limited seat is not discussed.

Term limits do not appear to have any practical effect in terms of electoral competition for the state legislature. Scholars do suggest that the quality of a challenger can theoretically have an effect in elections for state legislature, but is unlikely in practice. In a circuitous way, term limits imposed on a state legislature may create more competitive congressional elections.

Increased funding from lobbyists seems to also be a factor in making candidates more competitive. Regardless, though these studies do not examine cases below a state legislative level, term limits' benefits appear minor at best for electoral competition. Where the research falls short is in examining the quality of opposing candidates while an incumbent runs for reelection.

Summary

The benefits of term limits are unclear at best. In terms of “starting fresh” in the state legislature, term limits only seem to accomplish the recycling of politicians. Party holds on the legislature appear to stay constant despite the imposition of limits to an individual's time in office. Also, term limits do not seem to enhance the representation of constituents in a meaningful way, or produce any measurably different policy. Even the increased competitiveness of districts is inconclusive, and the career advancement of ambitious politicians is likely unabated by limits on a particular office. However, being one of the major arguments in favor of term limits, competitiveness has not been adequately examined at the local level. Moreover, the competitiveness of candidates entering contests for term limited offices is also unclear. The effects on policy, constituent representation, and politicians' career advancement may all be affected by how competitive an incumbent's reelection is. Due to the scarce research, term limits' effects at the local level, especially while an incumbent holds the seat, is worth examining.

From the literature review, this paper can advance the knowledge of term limits by testing two hypotheses:

1. *If term limits are imposed on local offices, then they will not increase the quality of candidates running in term limited contests.*

2. *If term limits are imposed on local offices, then term limits will not increase incumbent turnover and will cause less competitive contests through greater vote margin.*
3. *If term limits are imposed on partisan offices, and offices with an incumbent running for reelection, then term limits will create less competitive elections.*

Research Design

This paper examines competitive local elections from two aspects. The first aspect involves personal candidate surveys, which are used to gauge the competitiveness of a candidate. The second aspect involves data of electoral outcomes in which those candidates were running, including percentage of vote by candidate. Both surveys and electoral data derive from 2010 mayoral, city council, school board, county commissioner, and special district races in California, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, and the state of Washington. These states are chosen because they include the three major types of offices: non-term limited, term limited, and non-partisan.

Term Limits' Effects on the Composition of Elections

The first hypothesis is tested by determining the competitiveness of candidates in term limited offices, measured against those of non term limited offices. Measures including education, prior political experience, candidate recruitment, and candidate help during the campaign are examined in the context of term limits. Higher quality candidates are likely to be better educated, have prior experience, and possibly are recruited and aided by party officials in congressional elections (Jacobson 42). Such measures seem appropriate to measure the competitiveness of candidates at local levels as well.

The Effect of Term Limits on Competitiveness

The measure of electoral competitiveness is based on the closeness of the outcome, and the turnover of an incumbent. This derives from Gary Jacobson's method in determining the competitiveness of congressional elections; in which "measures of marginality are, in essence, estimates of vulnerability" (Jacobson 32). The percent margin of victory and turnover of an incumbent are compared on a contest-level analysis, rather than on an individual level. In multi-candidate elections, in which multiple seats are up for election, the vote margin is determined as the percentage margin between the winner with the lowest number of votes and loser with the highest number of votes. This allows for each contest's vote margin to be coded and compared across contests. In this way, the correlation between term limits and electoral competitiveness is analyzed at the contest level.

Limitations

The competitiveness of candidates at the individual level is analyzed quantitatively, but this nonetheless excludes many measures of qualitative data. How the voter perceives the effectiveness of campaigns, how well-respected the candidate is, or simply how well-known the candidate is at the local level are not examined in the context of these data. As such, several possible aspects of competitiveness are unknown. These unknown variables may have a slight influence on the data. Furthermore, while the survey data makes clear *if* the candidate is a prior officeholder, it is unknown in many cases *which* prior offices they held. Some prior offices, such as state legislator or mayor, may give the candidate an advantage over their opponents in name recognition and resources. Unfortunately, the data analysis does not distinguish prior offices, and this may slightly affect the outcome of the analysis.

Similar problems exist for the contest-level data. Certain contests' outcomes may be affected by variables that cannot be recorded; such as a candidate that chose not to campaign (but put

their name on the ballot), or a particular special district office that is thought to be a stepping stone to a higher office (and thus create a more competitive seat). This may reflect upon the data slightly; however the volume of data collected is likely to overshadow the more exceptional contests.

Data

The survey-level dataset consists of approximately four hundred fifty candidate responses in the 2010 election cycle. Candidate responses come from contests in California, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, and the state of Washington. The survey includes data that identifies the location of the contest, as well as if the respondent was victorious in their campaign. The dataset includes information from respondents about their level of education (which is coded on a 1-5 scale), if and by whom they were recruited to run in the contest, what groups helped the candidates in their campaigns, if the candidate is an incumbent, if the candidate held a prior public office, and if the candidate was endorsed by a newspaper. These variables are analyzed in the context of term limits to determine whether term limits are effecting the composition of a contest.

The contest-level data derives from a dataset of approximately two thousand three hundred candidates in the 2010 elections. These candidates come from mayoral, county commissioner, city council, school board, and special district contests in the five states mentioned previously. The information gathered includes, where available, the presence of term limits in the contest, the incumbency status of the candidate, and the vote margin the candidate received. These candidates represent approximately one thousand contests. Each contest is coded with the vote margin between the winner and loser, as well as (if applicable) whether the incumbent won or

lost in the contest. The vote margin and win/loss of incumbents are analyzed in the context of term limits to determine the competitiveness of the contests.

Both the survey and contest-level datasets are gathered from the Local Government Elections Project (“Local Government Elections Project”). For the purposes of this paper’s data analysis, I collected data on candidates’ incumbency status, and whether term limits are implemented in the offices examined (where possible).

Data Analysis

Individual-Level Data

The survey analysis includes data from five states, broken down as follows:

State	Number of Candidates	Percent of Total
California	115	27.98%
Colorado	75	18.25%
Florida	84	20.43%
Virginia	54	13.14%
Washington	83	20.20%

The candidates running in term limited or non-term limited offices are also surveyed from the same five states. Three hundred seventy-eight candidates in total could be identified as campaigning in contests with or without term limits.

State	No Term Limits	Term Limits	Total Candidates
California	72	38	110
Colorado	27	42	69
Florida	54	22	76
Virginia	33	16	49
Washington	65	9	74
Total	251	127	378

Four hundred eleven candidates were identified as running in visible contests. Visible contests, consisting of mayoral and county commissioner candidates, are sparser in the data. This is especially the case with California.

State	Non-Visible Contest	Visible Contest	Candidate Total
California	111	4	115
Colorado	44	31	75
Florida	65	19	84
Virginia	53	1	54
Washington	68	15	83
Total	341	70	411

A measure of quality candidates in this analysis includes how the candidate was recruited. Specifically examined is the role of elected officials as well as political parties. Both measures of candidate recruitment are tested controlling for the other. The data rejects the null hypothesis that term limits effect the composition of an election; very little difference exists between candidates campaigning for term limited offices and non-term limited offices. Neither indicates a large correlation or any statistical significance for term limits.

Candidate Recruitment ¹				
	Elected Official Importance		Political Party Importance	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant	0.4515***	0.0360	0.2239***	0.0401
Term Limits	-0.0177	0.0524	0.0554	0.0512
Importance of Party Recruitment (Control)	0.2761***	0.0508	---	---
Importance of Elected Official Recruitment (Control)	---	---	0.2647***	0.0487

¹ One * denotes probability of coefficient statistical significance of less than .10

** Denotes probability of coefficient statistical significance of less than .05

*** Denotes probability of coefficient statistical significant of less than .01

Number of Observations	378	378
F	14.7900	15.3500
Probability > F	0.0000	0.0000
R - Squared	0.0700	0.0757
Adj. R - Squared	0.0680	0.0708
Root MSE	0.4810	0.4706

Another gauge of competitiveness is the help that candidates receive as they campaign. The measures in this dataset that best indicate quality candidate help are aid from elected officials and political parties. Both variables are tested controlling for the other. Much like candidate recruitment, there is little substantive difference of candidate recruitment in contests for term limited and non-term limited offices.

Candidate Campaign Volunteers				
	Help from Elected Officials		Help from Political Parties	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant	0.3049***	0.3798	0.3126***	0.0376
Term Limits	-0.0259	0.0504	0.0783	0.0500
Help from Party (Control)	0.3943***	0.4777	---	---
Help from Elected Official (Control)	---	---	0.3900***	0.0472
Number of Observations	378		378	
F	34.0900		35.3900	
Probability > F	0.0000		0.0000	
R - Squared	0.1539		0.1588	
Adj. R - Squared	0.1493		0.1543	
Root MSE	0.4617		0.4592	

Education is also gauged as a measure of competitiveness. It is evaluated on a scale of one through six, one representing a graduate degree and six representing less than a high school degree. As with candidate recruitment and candidate volunteers, there is little correlation

between term limits and education; the null hypothesis that term limits effect the composition of an election is rejected.

Candidate Education in the Presence of Term Limited Offices			
	Non-Term Limited Offices	Term Limited Offices	
Level of Education	0	1	Total
1	79	27	106
2	92	45	137
3	51	27	78
4	6	7	13
5	2	0	2
6	5	7	12
Total	235	113	348
	Pearson Chi2 (5)	9.872	
	Pr	0.079	

A further measure of candidate competitiveness is endorsement by newspapers. Media endorsements suggest both candidate visibility, and awareness of the candidate in the community. These data do suggest moderate positive correlation between the presence of term limits and candidate endorsement by a local newspaper. If term limits exist, there appears to be a greater likelihood of a candidate being endorsed. This correlation remains constant while controlling for candidate incumbency and partisan contests. The reason for this is not entirely clear, but may have to do with contests for term limited offices being more high profile or less competitive. If one candidate is clearly going to win, newspapers may be more prone to endorsing that candidate. As such, the null hypothesis that term limits effect candidate competitiveness is not rejected in this case.

Candidate Newspaper Endorsement in Presence of Term Limits			
	Coefficient	Standard Error	P > t
Constant	0.2408	0.0309	0.0000

Term Limits	0.1075	0.0402	0.0080
Incumbency (Control)	-0.0584	0.0457	0.2020
Partisan (Control)	0.1269	0.0418	0.0020
Number of Observations	562		
F	7.74		
Probability > F	0.0007		
R-Squared	0.0299		
Adjusted R-Squared	0.0247		
Root MSE	0.45626		

Perhaps the best indicator of a quality candidate is whether the candidate has held a prior public office. These data suggest a moderate, statistically significant negative correlation between term limits and candidates having held a prior office. More simply, less experienced candidates are more likely to run in contests for term limited offices. The null hypothesis is not rejected by the data in this case. More interestingly, the effect of term limits is nullified when controlling for the presence of an incumbent in the contest. This suggests that lower-quality candidates (those without prior office experience) will *not* run in contests for term limited offices while an incumbent holds the seat. It is possible that lower-quality candidates wait until the seat is open, recognizing that they are unlikely to unseat an incumbent.

	Likelihood of Candidates Holding Prior Office			
	Without Controlling for Incumbent in Contest		Controlling for Incumbent in Contest	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant	0.5080***	0.0313	0.2767***	0.0526
Term Limits	-0.1509***	0.0540	-0.0706	0.0543
Incumbent in Contest	---	---	0.2973***	0.0526
Number of Observations	376		374	
F	7.8000		18.6300	
Probability > F	0.0055		0.0000	

R-Squared	0.0204	0.0912
Adjusted R-Squared	0.0178	0.0863
Root MSE	0.4944	0.4768

Contest-Level Data

The contest-level data is drawn from the same states as the survey data. One thousand contests are analyzed, most of which coming from Colorado, Florida, and the state of Washington.

State	Number of Contests
California	133
Colorado	248
Florida	246
Virginia	107
Washington	267
Total	1001

The presence or absence of term limits is known in approximately two hundred forty contests.

State	Contests with No Term Limits	Contests with Term Limits	Total
California	50	17	67
Colorado	28	17	35
Florida	31	11	42
Virginia	14	6	20
Washington	54	10	64
Total	177	61	238

The average vote margin varies across states, and across term limited and non-term limited offices.

State	Average Vote Margin	
	Without Term Limits	With Term Limits
California	9.15	10.43

Colorado	53.12 ²	28.94
Florida	16.35	14.50
Virginia	13.64	14.59
Washington	14.90	26.39

At the contest level, this paper analyzes two measures of competitiveness; the turnover of incumbents and the vote margin of each contest. To test the turnover of incumbents, the victory or defeat of incumbents is examined in the context of both term limited and non-term limited offices. The null hypothesis is not rejected by the data, there appears to be no correlation between an incumbent winning or losing a contest, and term limits. Because of this, no interpretation can be made of electoral competitiveness based on incumbent turnover.

Incumbent Victory/Loss in Term Limited Contests			
	Coefficient	Standard Error	P > t
Term Limits	-0.0050	0.0740	0.9450
Visible Contest (Constant)	0.0033	0.1148	0.9770
Partisan Contest (Constant)	-0.0180	0.0668	0.7860
Unopposed Candidate (Constant)	0.2550	0.1424	0.0750
Constant	0.7610	0.0417	0.0000
Number of Observations	193		
F	0.8100		
Probability > F	0.5175		
R - Squared	0.0170		
Adj. R - Squared	-0.0039		
Root MSE	0.4248		

Because unopposed candidates, by definition, do not lose their seats, also examined is the correlation of unopposed candidates and term limits. Unopposed candidates in this analysis are considered candidates campaigning in a contest as the only name on the ballot. They often, but not always, have one hundred percent of the vote. In some cases, write-in candidates on the

² The vote margin for non-term limited contests in Colorado includes a large proportion of unopposed candidates. As such, this skews the results towards a less competitive vote margin, as most unopposed candidates have a 100% share of the ballots cast.

ballot had a sizeable share of the vote total. As such, unopposed candidates may have competitors in an election, but no *named* competitors. Regardless, holding incumbency constant, no statistically significant results are found. Term limits do not correlate to unopposed candidates keeping or losing their seats.

Correlation of Unopposed Candidates and Term Limits			
	Coefficient	Standard Error	P > t
Term Limits	0.0127	0.0303	0.6750
Incumbency (Constant)	0.0982	0.0276	0.0000
Constant	-0.0042	0.0212	0.8430
Number of Observations	221		
F	6.3500		
Probability > F	0.0021		
R - Squared	0.0551		
Adj. R - Squared	0.0464		
Root MSE	0.2034		

In both the cases of incumbent turnover and unopposed candidates, there is not enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis that term limits do not affect the competitiveness of a contest. The other measure of competitiveness on the contest level, vote margin, yields some more noticeable effects. To analyze vote margin, the vote margin of contests are analyzed in the context of term limits, while holding constant partisan contests, incumbency, and visible contests one at a time. This allows being able to analyze the correlation of each of those variables on the vote margin. Without holding any other variables constant, term limits do not correlate with the vote margin of a contest. This finding does not reject the null hypothesis that term limits do not affect the competitiveness of contests. When controlling for visible contests, the correlation is also minimal. However, while controlling for incumbency, the effect of incumbency in conjunction with term limits is statistically significant. This suggests that term limited offices with an incumbent will be less competitive (with a higher vote margin), as compared to offices without

term limits and an incumbent. This finding rejects the null hypothesis as well. The greatest correlation occurs when controlling for partisan contests. The effect of term limits becomes more pronounced, suggesting that partisan contests suppress the effects of term limits. Regardless, partisan, term limited contests are correlated with lower competitiveness.

Effect of Term Limits on Vote Margin								
	No Control for Other Variables		Controlling for Incumbency		Controlling for Visible Contest		Controlling for Partisan Contest	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant	17.2451***	1.8122	11.6289***	2.5524	17.3464***	2.0307	11.0286***	2.3526
Term Limits	3.5690	3.2948	1.5732	4.4019	3.6031	3.8508	8.4421***	4.2178
Incumbency	---	---	10.7454***	3.6215	---	---	---	---
Visible Contest	---	---	---	---	1.4774	4.971	---	---
Partisan Contest	---	---	---	---	---	---	15.4112***	3.6047
Number of Observations	238		216		233		233	
F	1.1700		6.62		0.3800		6.6400	
Probability > F	0.2798		0.0003		0.7659		0.0003	
R-Squared	0.0049		0.0857		0.0050		0.0800	
Adjusted R-Squared	0.0007		0.0728		-0.0081		0.0679	
Root MSE	22.6240		22.397		23.5940		22.6870	

In an actual election, the effect of term limits on vote margins while controlling for incumbency might look like this:

		Incumbent in Contest	
		No Incumbent	Incumbent Present
Term Limited Office	No Term Limits	10.55	23.46
	Term Limits Present	28.23	29.23
Predicted Vote Margin = $b_0 + b_1$ (term limits) + b_2 (incumbency)			

There is a strong correlation between an incumbent in the race, and term limits being present. Contests with no term limits and no incumbent are expected to have vote margins nearly nineteen percentage points below contests with an incumbent and term limits. It appears that term limited incumbents are more likely to have an easier time being elected, due to the expected vote margins being so much larger (and, thus, less competitive).

The effects of term limits on vote margins while controlling for partisan contests would likely look similar:

		Partisan Contests	
		Nonpartisan Contest	Partisan Contest
Term Limited Office	No Term Limits	11.02	26.43
	Term Limits Present	19.46	23.31
Predicted Vote Margin = $b_0 + b_1$ (term limits) + b_2 (partisan contest) + b_3 (term limits × incumbency)			

Voters are “cued in” to a candidate’s affiliation in a partisan contest. Thus, competitiveness may go down (while vote margins increase) when voters can make decisions based on their party affiliation rather than name recognition. Also worth noting is that nonpartisan, term limited

contests are expected to be slightly more competitive than nonpartisan contests without term limits. It may be that, even in term limited contests without an “R” or a “D” on the ballot, candidates will self-select out of contests until the incumbent is out of office. This would, perhaps, result in a larger vote margin for the incumbent even in a nonpartisan race. In this case, the null hypothesis that term limits do not affect the competitiveness of contests is not rejected, because non-term limited partisan contests are less competitive than term limited partisan contests.

Conclusion

In terms of the individual-level data, the analysis generally supports Carey’s view that term limits do not greatly affect the composition of contests. In terms of education, candidate recruitment, and candidate campaign help, very little difference exists between term limited and non-term limited contests. Term limited contests do correlate with more candidate endorsements. Also, candidates in term limited elections are less likely to have held a previous office than candidates in non-term limited elections. This effect is mitigated while an incumbent is running in the race, suggesting that low quality candidates self-select out of contests in which there is an incumbent. At best, at the candidate level, term limits have little effect. Their implementation does not yield noticeable candidate quality. At worst, as seems to be the case especially with prior office-holders, term limits may have an adverse effect; essentially weeding out challengers to an incumbent.

At the contest level, term limits do not seem to correlate to an incumbent being overturned or unopposed. However, when the vote margins of contests are analyzed, term limits, incumbency, and contest partisanship correlate to less competitiveness. Term limits alone may not be the cause of decreased competitiveness. But in conjunction with other factors, term limits’ effect

may be magnified. It could be the presence of term limits, contrary to the claims of the *Cato Handbook for Congress*, which put “incumbents beyond the reach of the people.” Less competitive contests (by nearly nineteen points in this analysis), resulting from a combination of incumbency and term limits, only serve to insulate the incumbent. Again, as with the survey-level data, term limits seem to have no effect or some very noticeable negative effects.

The implications from this analysis suggest that term limits do not offset the resources of the incumbent in a contest. Nor do they seem to greatly affect the types of people entering the contest, save for perhaps being an entry barrier for lower-quality candidates. Term limits may, in fact, allow incumbents an easier reelection. Not only will this obviously keep the incumbent in office longer, but it may affect the quality of representation of constituents. Lopez suggests a similar scenario due to a weakening of electoral sorting mechanisms. If incumbents are almost guaranteed victory until they are term limited out of office, there could be less reason for them to represent constituent interests. The connection to the voters is possibly severed through an increase in vote margin, as candidates representing other viewpoints lose or wait until the incumbent is term limited out. Furthermore, an incumbent is less accountable to voters through the ballot box if Election Day victory is almost assured.

However, term limits certainly have one very noticeable effect: “kicking the bums out” after a set number of years. Vote margins may be increasing in the meantime, but term limit proponents can still claim victory over the incumbent in the end. I would suggest, however, that term limits may not actually rid politics of incumbents. It is a possibility that they simply run for office somewhere else. Such an investigation seems the natural next step after this paper. It would require several years’ worth of data over many types of offices. But, determining what actually happens to the “bums” may make or break the case for term limits. Another possibility

for future research involves unopposed candidates. In the data presented in this paper, there were simply not enough cases of unopposed, term limited candidates to depict term limits' effects in a meaningful way. An improvement to this research design would reflect that, and in doing so gain a better understanding of why unopposed candidates are unopposed.

This paper adds to the knowledge of term limits' effects in local contests, and on competitiveness. While term limits do not seem worth the burden of implementing on an office, future research could focus on individual candidates and their career paths after being term limited. In the meantime, ridding offices of term limits may bring some greater electoral competition back to local contests.

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