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The Impact of Term Limits on Women

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Contrary to the expectation of term-limit advocates and many scholars, the number of women serving in term-limited statehouse seats actually decreased following the 1998 and 2000 elections. One of the major reasons for this was the fact that a substantial proportion of term-limited house seats went uncontested by a woman candidate. Term limits alone, then, are not enough to increase the number of female elected leaders; efforts such as recruitment will be needed to compliment the opportunities presented to women by term limits.

Term-limit proponents contend that increases in the numbers of women serving in state legislatures will be one of the benefits of term limits. Several major studies have concluded that incumbency is one of the barriers to increasing the number of women serving in elective office since high proportions of incumbents who seek re-election are re-elected. Researchers have argued that term limits, by breaking the stranglehold of incumbency and increasing legislative turnover, would create more winnable open-seat opportunities for women, translating into increased numbers of women legislators.

The Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, has collected data for 1998 and 2000,¹ the first two elections where term limits were implemented across numerous states. As the analysis below demonstrates, women have fared better under term limits in state senates than in state houses.

How did women fare in races for term-limited state house seats?

Contrary to the expectation of term-limit advocates and many scholars, the number of women serving in term-limited state house seats actually decreased following the 1998 and 2000 elections; more women were forced to vacate seats because of term limits than were elected to

seats that were open as a result of term limits. Across the six states that implemented term limits for state house races in 1998, 47 incumbent women were forced to leave office as a result of term limits while only 43 women won election to house seats vacated by term-limited incumbents (Table 1). Similarly, across the

limits. In one state, the numbers of women serving in term-limited seats stayed the same in 1998, and in three states, the numbers decreased.

Similarly, in only three of the 11 states affected by term limits in 2000 were more women were elected to house seats than were forced out of office. In

three states the numbers of women in term-limited seats stayed the same while women's numbers decreased in five states.

Table 1: Numbers and Proportions of Term-Limited State House Seats Represented by Women Before and After the 1998 Elections in Six States

State	Pre-Election		Post-Election	
	N=	%=	N=	%=
Arkansas	9	18.4	8	16.3
California	6	37.5	6	37.5
Colorado	9	50.0	2	11.0
Maine	2	18.2	1	9.1
Michigan	16	25.0	17	26.6
Oregon	5	23.8	9	42.9
All 6 States	47	26.3	43	24.0

11 states in which term limits were in effect for house seats in 2000, 70 women who served in term-limited seats left office while only 65 new women were elected to seats that were open as a result of term limits (Table 2).²

The numbers of women elected to term-limited seats varied notably across the six states. In 1998, only two of the six states had more women elected to seats that were open due to term limits than were forced out of office because of term

Why did the number of women serving in term-limited state house seats decrease?

One of the major reasons the number of women decreased was the fact that a substantial proportion of term-limited house seats went uncontested by a woman candidate. For both elections across all term-limited states, in more than two-fifths³ of all races for term-limited house seats, no woman entered either the Republican or the Democratic primary.

As a result, most of the women forced out of office by term limits were replaced by men; 74.5 percent of the term-limited house seats in 1998 and 71.4 percent of the term-limited house seats in 2000 held by women before the election were held by men following the election. Because

term-limited women incumbents were seldom replaced by other women, women would have had to win many term-limited house seats previously held by men in order simply to maintain their numbers.

How did women fare in races for term-limited state senate seats?

The expectation that term limits would lead to increases in the number of women legislators finds some support at the state senate level, but only for the 1998 (Table 3), and not the 2000 (Table 4), elections.

State	Pre-Election		Post-Election	
	N=	%=	N=	%=
Arizona	4	26.7	4	26.7
Arkansas	6	25.0	1	4.2
California	5	21.7	8	34.8
Colorado	3	30.0	1	10.0
Florida	11	20.3	11	20.3
Maine	5	31.3	4	25.0
Michigan	7	33.3	4	19.0
Montana	7	20.6	6	17.6
Ohio	12	27.9	14	32.6
Oregon	7	46.7	7	46.7
South Dakota	3	15.0	5	25.0
All 11 States	70	25.5	65	23.6

In 1998, three women were forced to give up term-limited senate seats, but 10 other women were elected to senate seats that were vacated because of term limits (Table 3). In 2000, 19 women had to step down from senate seats due to term limits, and 19 other women were elected to term-limited seats (Table 4).

In 1998 women made gains in term-limited seats in each of the three states that had implemented term limits for state senate seats (Table 4), but in 2000 the picture was decidedly more mixed. In two states, more women were elected to senate seats that were open because of term limits than were forced to vacate term-limited seats. In four states, the numbers of women serving in term-limited senate seats was the

same before and after the 2000 elections.

Finally, in four states, more women were forced out by term-limits than were elected to seats that were open because of term limits, resulting in decreases in the numbers of women serving in term-limited seats (Table 4).

Why have women fared better in races for term-limited state senate seats than in races for term-limited state house seats?

Proportionately fewer women serve in the upper houses than in the lower houses of state legislatures.⁴ As a result, women have been a somewhat smaller proportion of those forced to leave office in state senates than in state houses. In 1998, only 14.3 percent of all senators forced out of office by term limits were women compared to 26.3 percent of all term-limited state representatives. In 2000, 20.2 percent of term-limited senators were women compared with 25.5 percent of term-limited state representatives.

Women have also been somewhat more likely to run for seats vacated by term-limited women incumbents at the state senate than at the state house level. In 1998, five women ran in primaries for the three seats vacated by term-limited women senators (although only one of the five won her race). In 2000, 10 women ran in primaries for the 19 seats vacated by term-limited women senators.

However, the major reason that women have fared better under term limits at the state senate than at the state house level is that politically experienced state representatives, many of whom have been forced

out of the lower houses of their legislatures by term limits, have taken advantage of term-limited senate seats that have opened up. In 1998, nine of the 10 women who were elected to senate seats open because of term limits were former state representatives. Four had been forced to vacate their house seats in 1998, one had been term-limited out of the house in 1996, and four had left their house seats to run for the senate when state senate seats in their districts opened up because of term limits.⁵

In 2000, a smaller proportion than in 1998, but a still sizeable proportion, two-thirds, of the women elected to senate seats that were open because of term limits were former state representatives. Of the 19 women elected to term-limited senate seats, 13 had served in the lower houses of their legislatures. Eight of the 13 had been forced to give up their house seats because of term limits,⁶ and three had given up their house seats in 2000 in order to run for senate seats that were open because of term limits.

2002 and beyond

The gains made by women in term-limited state senate seats in 1998 demonstrate that term limits can lead to increased numbers of women in office if women candidates, especially politically experienced candidates, take advantage of the opportunities that term limits provide. Nevertheless, the mere existence of more political opportunities does not seem sufficient to increase the number of women serving in office. Although women were successful in winning election to a minority of the term-limited house seats vacated by men, men replaced a majority of the women legislators who relinquished their house seats in both 1998 and 2000. Many

State	Pre-Election		Post-Election	
	N=	%=	N=	%=
California	1	9.1	5	45.5
Colorado	2	22.2	4	44.4
Maine	0	0.0	1	100.0
All 3 States	3	14.3	10	47.6

Table 4: Numbers and Proportions of Term-Limited State Senate Seats Represented by Women Before and After the 2000 Elections in Ten States

State	Pre-Election		Post-Election	
	N=	%=	N=	%=
Arizona	1	14.3	4	57.1
Arkansas	0	0.0	3	23.1
California	2	25.0	1	12.5
Colorado	5	45.5	2	18.2
Florida	2	18.2	2	18.2
Maine	3	42.9	3	42.9
Montana	2	15.4	1	7.8
Ohio	2	33.3	1	16.7
Oregon	1	20.0	1	20.0
South Dakota	1	7.8	1	7.8
All 10 States	19	20.2	19	20.2

of the seats vacated by incumbents, even women incumbents, went uncontested by women candidates.

Thus far, women have fared better in term-limited seats for state senates than for state houses because there seems to be a “pipeline” effect at work. State representatives appear to constitute an obvious pool of strong potential candidates for the state senate, and so far, this pool has been sufficient to increase (in 1998) or maintain (in 2000) women’s numbers among state senators serving in term-limited seats. At the state house level, however, an obvious pool of potential candidates does not appear to exist.

Studies have found that women who run for state legislatures are less likely than their male counterparts to be “self-starters.” Women more often than men seek office only after receiving encouragement from others, suggesting recruitment efforts are necessary if women are to take advantage of the opportunity presented by term limits. Political parties and advocacy organizations could help by identifying and recruiting potential women candidates in districts where incumbents will be forced to retire because of term limits. PACs could provide much needed financial support and technical assistance for women running for term-limited seats. Incumbent term-limited women legisla-

tors could help by identifying and grooming female successors for their seats. Efforts such as these could help to insure that the opportunities offered by term limits translate into actual increases in the number of women legislators.

Additional research is certainly needed as term limits continue to be implemented in subsequent elections. Nevertheless, the data from 1998 and 2000 clearly suggest that term limits, like many other reforms, are neither inherently bad nor inherently good, at least when it comes to increasing women’s

representation. Rather, in the long run, the effect of term limits on the number of women legislators is likely to be strongly influenced by the degree and effectiveness of efforts to recruit women candidates in term-limited states.

Notes

¹For purposes of this analysis, we compiled a data set for: all 1998 state house races in the six states that had by then implemented term limits for house seats (Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Michigan, and Oregon); all 2000 state house races in the above six states plus all house races in the five states that implemented term limits for house seats for the first time in 2000 (Arizona, Florida, Montana, Ohio, and South Dakota); all 1998 state senate races in the three states that had by then implemented term limits for state senate seats (California, Colorado, and Maine); and all 2000 state senate races in the above three states plus all senate races in the seven states that implemented term limits for senate seats for the first time in 2000 (Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota). Most of our data on candidates was obtained from the Project Vote Smart web site (www.vote-smart.org) and the office of the secretary of state in each state. I would particularly like to thank Krista Jenkins and Gilda Morales of the Center for American Women and Politics for their efforts in collecting the data.

²Although the number of women serving in

term-limited seats decreased in each election, the total number of women serving in the lower houses of the six states that implemented term limits in 1998 remained the same—145—before and after the 1998 elections, and the total number of women state representatives in the 11 states affected by term limits in 2000 actually increased following the 2000 elections from 265 to 271. This is because women were able to compensate for losses in term-limited seats by winning races where they challenged incumbents (in both 1998 and 2000) and where seats were open for reasons other than term limits (in 2000).

³42.5 percent in 1998 and 43.6 percent in 2000.

⁴In 2001, women constitute 23.3 percent of state representatives and 20.0 percent of state senators nationally (Center for American Women and Politics 2001).

⁵Although these women representatives had not yet been forced out of the house by term limits, their decisions to run for senate seats may well have been influenced by their knowledge that they inevitably would be term limited out of the house in the near future.

⁶Seven of the eight women had been term limited out in 2000; one had been term limited out in 1998.

Bio

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