

THE MESOCRATIC PARTY | POLICY WHITE PAPER

12 Years and Out

The Case for Congressional Term Limits and the End of the Permanent Political Class

Serve. Then go home.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

1. The Problem: The Permanent Class

- 1.1 The Incumbency Machine
- 1.2 The Money Advantage
- 1.3 The Seniority Trap
- 1.4 The Revolving Door

2. The Data: What Congress Actually Looks Like

- 2.1 Reelection Rates
- 2.2 Tenure Trends
- 2.3 The Age of Congress
- 2.4 Campaign Finance and Incumbency

3. What Term Limits Do: Evidence from the States

- 3.1 The 15 States with Term Limits
- 3.2 Impact on Diversity
- 3.3 Impact on Legislation
- 3.4 Impact on Lobbyist Influence
- 3.5 The Institutional Knowledge Question

4. The Proposal

- 4.1 The Structure: 12 Years in Each Chamber

- 4.2 Prospective Application
- 4.3 The Constitutional Pathway
- 4.4 The Mesocratic Pledge

5. Addressing the Counterarguments

- 5.1 “Voters Already Have Term Limits — Elections”
- 5.2 “You Lose Institutional Knowledge”
- 5.3 “Lobbyists Gain Power”
- 5.4 “It’s Unconstitutional”

6. How the Parties Compare on Term Limits

7. Conclusion

Sources and References

Executive Summary

In 2024, 97% of congressional incumbents who sought reelection won. In 2022, the number was 96%. Every incumbent senator who ran was reelected. House reelection rates have never dropped below 85% in the modern era, and have reached as high as 98%.

Congress is not competitive. It is a closed system in which incumbents win because they are incumbents — backed by more money, more name recognition, more donor relationships, and more structural advantages than any challenger can overcome. The result is a permanent political class that bears little resemblance to the citizen-legislators the founders envisioned.

Meanwhile, 83% of American voters support amending the Constitution to establish congressional term limits — 86% of Republicans and 80% of Democrats. It is one of the most popular policy proposals in America and one of the least likely to be enacted, because the people who would have to pass it are the people it would remove.

The Mesocratic Party proposes a simple, clean term limit:

- **House of Representatives:** Six terms (12 years maximum).
- **Senate:** Two terms (12 years maximum).
- **Application:** Prospective — current members’ clocks start at ratification.
- **Pathway:** Constitutional amendment via Article V, pursued through both congressional proposal and a convention of states.

Twelve years is not short. It is enough time for a member to develop expertise, chair committees, pass major legislation, and leave a legacy. It is longer than the average Fortune 500 CEO’s tenure. It is longer than two presidential terms. What it does is ensure that every seat opens regularly, that fresh perspectives enter the system, and that no one treats a congressional seat as a lifetime appointment.

The Mesocratic Party does not wait for the amendment. All Mesocratic candidates for Congress voluntarily pledge to serve no more than 12 years in either chamber. Lead by example. Then change the law.

1. The Problem: The Permanent Class

1.1 The Incumbency Machine

The United States Congress was designed as a representative body of citizen-legislators — people who serve temporarily and return to their communities. In practice, it has become a body of career politicians who remain in office for decades.

The incumbency reelection rate tells the story:

Year	House Incumbent Win Rate	Senate Incumbent Win Rate
2024	97%	97%
2022	94% (House)	100% (Senate)
2020	96%	84%
2016	97%	93%
2004	98%	96%
Historical average (House, since 1964)	~93%	~82%

Sources: Ballotpedia; OpenSecrets; CRS.

In 2024, all congressional incumbents were reelected in 41 of 50 states. The “action” — the competitive races that actually produced change — occurred in a small sliver of seats. The rest were foregone conclusions.

This is not what competitive democracy looks like.

1.2 The Money Advantage

Incumbents win in large part because they raise dramatically more money than challengers. Donors invest in incumbents because incumbents are likely to win, and incumbents are likely to win because donors invest in them. It is a self-reinforcing cycle.

The top spenders in House races have won approximately 92% of the time since 2000. Contributions to incumbent representatives have increased roughly 4% more per cycle than contributions to challengers. In many races, challengers cannot raise enough to mount a credible campaign.

The financial incumbency advantage is so severe that in many election cycles, dozens of incumbents run entirely unopposed — the opposing party doesn’t even field a candidate,

because the mathematical futility of challenging a well-funded incumbent is apparent to everyone.

1.3 The Seniority Trap

Congress operates on a seniority system. Committee chairmanships — the positions of real legislative power — are awarded primarily based on length of service. The longer a member serves, the more power they accumulate. This creates a perverse incentive: the system rewards those who stay the longest, concentrating authority in the hands of the most entrenched members.

The seniority system also distorts representation. Newer members, who may better reflect current public sentiment, have less influence. Veteran members, who may have been elected under very different circumstances decades earlier, hold disproportionate power.

1.4 The Revolving Door

Long tenure in Congress creates deep relationships with lobbyists, donors, and industries. These relationships become the foundation of post-congressional careers. Former members of Congress are among the most sought-after and highly compensated lobbyists precisely because of the relationships and knowledge they accumulated during decades of service.

The longer a member serves, the more valuable they become to the lobbying industry after they leave — and the more incentive they have to cultivate those relationships while still in office.

2. The Data: What Congress Actually Looks Like

2.1 Reelection Rates

House incumbent reelection rates have never dropped below 85% in the modern era. They have exceeded 95% in multiple recent cycles. Senate rates are more variable — dropping as low as 50% during the 1980 Reagan revolution — but have averaged approximately 88% since 1990.

In 2022, for the first time in American history, every single incumbent U.S. senator who sought reelection won. The Senate achieved a 100% retention rate.

2.2 Tenure Trends

Average congressional tenure has increased over time. Multiple current and recent members have served 30, 40, or even 50+ years. Senators running for sixth terms — nearly 30 years in a single office — are not unusual.

Examples from recent cycles: Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) announced a run for her sixth term after nearly three decades in office. Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) sought reelection after

serving in various elected offices for nearly 40 consecutive years. Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi has served in Congress since 1987.

These are not aberrations. They are the norm in a system without term limits.

2.3 The Age of Congress

The absence of term limits contributes directly to the aging of Congress. Without mandatory turnover, members serve until they choose to retire or are defeated — which, given 93%+ reelection rates, rarely happens. Congress has become one of the oldest legislative bodies in the developed world.

2.4 Campaign Finance and Incumbency

OpenSecrets data shows that the incumbency financial advantage is self-perpetuating. Donors give to incumbents because they are likely to win. Incumbents win because donors give to them. Contributions to pro-term-limit PACs have increased significantly since 2018, reaching an all-time high of \$2.6 million in 2022, reflecting growing public frustration with the entrenchment problem.

3. What Term Limits Do: Evidence from the States

3.1 The 15 States with Term Limits

Fifteen states currently have legislative term limits. These provide a natural experiment for evaluating the effects of term limits on representation, legislation, and governance.

The states with term limits include Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. Term lengths vary — typically 6-12 years depending on the chamber.

3.2 Impact on Diversity

State-level evidence shows that term limits increase the diversity of legislative bodies. When incumbents are forced out, open seats attract a wider range of candidates — younger, more racially diverse, more professionally diverse, and more gender-balanced.

Term-limited legislatures have generally seen faster increases in the representation of women and minorities compared to non-term-limited legislatures, though other factors (redistricting, demographic change) also contribute.

3.3 Impact on Legislation

The evidence on legislative productivity is mixed. Some studies find that term-limited legislatures pass fewer bills but that the bills they pass are more focused and substantive. Others find minimal differences. What the evidence does not support is the claim that term limits cause legislative paralysis.

3.4 Impact on Lobbyist Influence

This is the strongest counterargument to term limits, and it deserves honest treatment.

Some research suggests that in term-limited states, lobbyists gain relative influence because newer legislators lack the institutional knowledge and relationships to resist lobbying pressure effectively. Experienced members may be better equipped to evaluate lobbyist claims and push back.

The Mesocratic Party takes this evidence seriously. It is why term limits are not proposed in isolation — they are part of a comprehensive framework that includes lobbying transparency (48-hour disclosure), a 5-year cooling-off period, and the Polis Doctorate credential. Term limits without lobbying reform risk transferring power from entrenched legislators to entrenched lobbyists. Term limits with lobbying reform break both entrenchments simultaneously.

3.5 The Institutional Knowledge Question

The concern about losing institutional knowledge is legitimate but overstated. First, 12 years is substantial — enough time for any capable legislator to develop deep expertise. Second, institutional knowledge in Congress is held not only by members but by professional committee staff, the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Government Accountability Office. These institutions persist regardless of member turnover.

Third, “institutional knowledge” can become a euphemism for “institutional entrenchment.” Knowing how the system works is valuable. Using that knowledge to protect the system from change is not.

4. The Proposal

4.1 The Structure: 12 Years in Each Chamber

- **House of Representatives:** Maximum of six two-year terms (12 years).
- **Senate:** Maximum of two six-year terms (12 years).
- **Cross-chamber:** Service in one chamber does not count against the limit in the other. A member could theoretically serve 12 years in the House and 12 years in the Senate (24 years total in Congress).

4.2 Prospective Application

The term limit applies prospectively from the date of ratification. Current members' clocks start at ratification — no sitting member is immediately forced out. This ensures an orderly transition and avoids the constitutional complications of retroactive application.

4.3 The Constitutional Pathway

Term limits for Congress require a constitutional amendment. Article V provides two pathways:

Congressional proposal: Two-thirds of both the House and Senate propose the amendment, followed by ratification by three-fourths of state legislatures (38 states). This is the traditional pathway but faces an obvious obstacle: Congress must vote to limit its own power.

Convention of states: Two-thirds of state legislatures (34 states) apply for a convention limited to the topic of congressional term limits. The convention proposes an amendment, which must then be ratified by three-fourths of state legislatures. Nine states have already passed term limits convention applications. Nineteen percent of all state legislators nationwide have signed pledges to support the convention resolution.

The Mesocratic Party supports pursuing both pathways simultaneously.

4.4 The Mesocratic Pledge

All Mesocratic candidates for federal office voluntarily commit to serving no more than 12 years in either chamber, regardless of whether the constitutional amendment has been ratified.

This is not symbolic. It is a binding commitment: Mesocratic members who complete their self-imposed term limit will not seek reelection. The party does not wait for the law to change. It changes its own behavior first.

5. Addressing the Counterarguments

5.1 “Voters Already Have Term Limits — Elections”

This is the most common objection, and it is refuted by a single number: 97%.

When incumbents win 97% of the time, elections are not functioning as a meaningful check on tenure. The structural advantages of incumbency — money, name recognition, gerrymandering, donor networks, and the seniority system — make most congressional elections non-competitive. Voters technically have the power to remove incumbents. In practice, the system is designed to prevent them from doing so.

The presidential term limit exists for exactly this reason. Before the 22nd Amendment, presidents could and did serve indefinitely — Franklin Roosevelt won four consecutive terms. The country decided that was too much power concentrated for too long. The same logic applies to Congress.

5.2 “You Lose Institutional Knowledge”

Addressed above in Section 3.5. Twelve years is substantial. Congressional staff, CRS, CBO, and GAO provide institutional continuity. And knowledge of how to perpetuate the current system is not the same as knowledge of how to govern well.

5.3 “Lobbyists Gain Power”

Addressed honestly in Section 3.4. This is a real risk — if term limits are enacted in isolation. The Mesocratic Party pairs term limits with lobbying transparency, a 5-year cooling-off period, and professional credentialing. The answer to the lobbyist concern is not “don’t pass term limits.” It is “pass term limits and lobbying reform together.”

5.4 “It’s Unconstitutional”

It requires a constitutional amendment — which is a constitutional process. The 22nd Amendment imposed term limits on the president. The same mechanism applies to Congress. Article V exists for exactly this purpose.

6. How the Parties Compare on Term Limits

	Republican	Mesocratic	Democrat
Position on term limits	Historically supportive in rhetoric; rarely in legislative action	Committed: 12-year limit, voluntary pledge, constitutional amendment	Generally opposed; argue elections are sufficient
Convention of states	Some support	Active pursuit	Oppose
Voluntary pledge	No party-wide commitment	Binding for all candidates	None
Paired with lobbying reform	Inconsistent	Yes (48-hour disclosure, 5-year cooling-off)	Mixed
Paired with pay reform	No	Yes (\$500K salary)	No
Public support	86% of Republican voters	—	80% of Democratic voters

Sources: University of Maryland/PIPA polling; various.

The most striking feature of the term limits debate is the gap between public support and legislative action. More than 80% of voters in both parties support term limits. Neither party has seriously pursued them. The Republican Party championed term limits in the 1994 Contract with America — then abandoned the effort once it gained majority control.

The Mesocratic Party is the only party that commits its own candidates to term limits before asking anyone else to.

7. Conclusion

The founders of the United States envisioned a Congress of citizen-legislators — people who serve the public for a time and then return to private life. What we have instead is a permanent political class that serves for decades, insulated by money, incumbency advantages, and a seniority system that rewards longevity over effectiveness.

The numbers are unambiguous:

- 97% incumbent reelection rate.
- 83% public support for term limits.
- 0% chance Congress will voluntarily limit itself.

The Mesocratic Party proposes to break this impasse — through a constitutional amendment pursued simultaneously via Congress and a convention of states, through a voluntary pledge that binds its own candidates immediately, and through companion reforms (lobbying transparency, pay reform, professional credentialing) that address the legitimate concerns about term limits enacted in isolation.

Twelve years is enough time to govern. It is enough time to develop expertise, to build a legislative record, to serve the public with distinction. What it is not enough time for is building the kind of entrenched personal empire that turns a congressional seat into a personal possession.

Serve the public. Do the work. Then go home. That's the job.

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This document is published by the Mesocratic National Committee and is available for public download at mesocrats.org/platform/term-limits.

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