

Result of term limits is not a pretty picture

A constitutional amendment limiting terms in office for state legislators was approved by 59 percent of Michigan voters in 1992. Representatives were limited to three terms (six years), effective in 1998, when nearly the entire membership of the House turned over. The two-term (eight years) limit for the Senate will take effect in 2002.

Supporters argued limiting terms would get rid of careerists, who made an entire career of being elected over and over again. Professional politicians would be replaced by "citizen politicians," who would bring new ideas to state government, do what's right and limit interest-group influence. I confess that I was one of the people who made those arguments. We now have had three years' experience with one house of a term-limited legislature.

What does the evidence show? It's not a pretty picture. Instead of encouraging citizen politicians, term limits appear to have provoked a frenzy of political ambition, with legislators obsessed with running for the next office "up" once their term is over. Far from bringing ordinary citizens into the process, term limits have worked perversely to increase political churn.

New ideas? Not so you'd notice. In fact, most legislation introduced amends bills previously passed. Better connections between state government and ordinary folks? Because legislators don't have enough time to gain expertise and experience, they have become more dependent on bureaucrats, lobbyists and staff members.

Here's a concrete example, gleaned from a knowledgeable and experienced Lansing hand whom I've known and trusted for years but who wishes to be anonymous:

Last year, a leading member of the House walked into the negotiations for the budget for fiscal year 2001 complete with an armload of demands that had to be met in order to get agreement. These demands were for millions in pork projects solely in that representative's district. From this event arose something called a "leadership agreement," which means that to get approval, enough pure pork has to be fed into the process to satisfy members of the legislative lead-

ership.

It's still going on. This year, tucked into an obscure corner of the proposed budget on community health, emerged another "leadership agreement" that would dump \$2 million into an Arab cultural center in West Bloomfield, which just happens to be in the district of one of the leaders.

As my source says, "This isn't public policy, it isn't advocacy for an issue or a program, which is the way budgets and appropriations used to be worked out. It's pure distillation of pork, under the packaging of a 'leadership agreement.' And the people who are doing it don't know any better

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because they have no experience with the way a sane and responsible appropriations process works.

As someone who was originally a supporter of term limits, I have concluded the notion was a bad idea whose time had come. As a practical matter, a legislator in office for only six years is not going to learn enough about what's going on to be effective. And a legislator who spends most of the time figuring out how to run for the next office is not going to be particularly courageous or responsible.

My Lansing sources say the budgeting and appropriations process now going in the capital as become chaotic because House members, with no experience in crafting a tight budget in hard economic times don't know what they're doing. And most people who have anything to do with Lansing simply sigh and roll their eyes at what will happen in 2003, after the experienced members of the Senate have left.

What's the solution? Some say term limits should be repealed. Others say they should be lengthened to, say, 12 years.

Either way, we need start a public discussion about changing this bad law. I'd urge readers to call their local lawmakers and ask them to come clean about how they feel about how things are going now with term limits. Most, if they're being honest, will say the present system stinks.

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Mike Malott

GOP unbothered with sportsman-like conduct

You've probably read the news stories about parents behaving in an unsportsmanlike fashion at little league ball games. Moms and dads get riled and turn their wrath on umpires, coaches, other parents and sometimes even players.

It's a shame, but in my experience — I have two boys who spent many evenings this spring at local ball fields — it's extremely rare. In fact, it's apparently unusual enough that it still warrants news coverage.

Compare that to poor sportsmanship in the state Capitol. That barely raises an eyebrow these days.

Any 9 year old knows that when you are way ahead, you don't just run up the score. That's when it's easy to be a good sport, when you can shrug off a wide strike, a bad call, even a few easy runs.

Little leaguers know this, but does the Republican leadership in the Michigan House of Representatives? Apparently not.

The issue was apportionment — the once-a-decade process of redrawing district boundaries following every census count. The GOP already has this game in the bag. Republicans control the House and the Senate. They have a Republican in the governor's office. And if it is inappropriate to say we have a Republican Supreme Court, it would also be untrue to deny that the justices are philosophically aligned with the conservative party.

Wouldn't this be the perfect time for Republicans to show an extra measure of sportsmanship in the redistricting process? Wouldn't this be the time to throw the process wide open, for all to see. Wouldn't this be the time to make sure everyone gets to have his say?

So, is that what Republicans did? Anything but. Instead, they hid their plan until the last possible moment. They denied they even had one up until moments before they voted final approval.

Rep. Andrew Richner, R-Grosse Pointe Park, introduced what can only be described as a stealth apportionment plan Thursday, June 14. The bill was literally blank. It contained no description of districts. It contained no maps.

At a hearing the next Tuesday, scheduled by Elections Committee chairman Rep. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, Democrats put their plan on the

table for public viewing. But Democrats also made a tactical error, making a motion to approve their plan. That gave Republicans a chance to escape the committee room without ever having to show theirs. They jumped at it without hesitation.

By Thursday afternoon, June 21, Richner had a 403-page bill ready to go for consideration on the floor, complete with maps. And they had built a consensus in caucus, 87 of them in agreement to support this suddenly produced bill.

They quickly tossed out the Democratic plan they'd approved in committee and replaced it with Richner's stealth plan. Then they voted final approval for it as fast as they could — no time for messy analysis by the opposing party, no time for any unseemly commentary from the public.

Republicans apparently expect us all — Democrats, the press and the public alike — to believe they didn't have the plan done one week earlier when Richner introduced a blank bill. They apparently expect us to believe it wasn't done two days earlier for the committee hearing.

The process of apportionment has long been dysfunctional in Michigan. In 1982, the state Supreme Court tossed out a section of the state constitution that assigned the job to an apportionment commission. The court said the commission was unworkable. And it was right.

But the justices ordered state lawmakers to come up with another system, and what they came up with was to let representatives and senators draw their own districts.

It is an obvious conflict of interest, but one state lawmakers conveniently ignore.

Bills were passed last year that they swear will make apportionment fair this year. But if the recent actions of the House are any indication of how this process will proceed, it is clear it's still dysfunctional.

I hope the justices of the Supreme Court will see that when it gets to them — as it always does — and order that apportionment be taken out of the hands of the state House and Senate.

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