

**Testimony of Sen. Jim DeMint  
Chairman  
Conservative Partnership Institute**

**Subcommittee on the Constitution  
Senate Judiciary Committee  
Keeping Congress Accountable: Term Limits in the United States  
June 18, 2019**

Thank you, Chairman Cruz and members of the subcommittee, for the invitation to be here today. It's extremely gracious of you, considering I'm going to spend my time here today advocating for your unemployment. It's nothing personal, I promise.

There are good arguments for and against congressional term limits. They are roughly the same arguments that delegates debated at the Constitutional Convention.

It was George Mason of Virginia who argued that "nothing is so essential to the preservation of a Republican government as a periodic rotation."

For his part, Rufus King of New York insisted "that he who has proved himself to be most fit for an office, ought not to be excluded by the constitution from holding it."

In theory, they are both right. Governmental turn-over is undeniably healthy for any republic, especially for one as large and diverse as ours. Meanwhile, disqualifying unusually capable legislators from serving would be a definite cost to the country. The *philosophical* argument about term limits can be a close call, as it was in 1787.

Unlike the Founders, however, we don't have to confine our debate to theoretical abstraction. We can draw on *real world* experience with our 230-year-old system, and especially its performance over the last few decades.

And the *practical* case for term limits, Mr. Chairman, is *not* a close call.

We do not have to speculate, as the Founders did, that the prospect of permanent tenure in Congress might tempt Senators and Representatives toward self-interested, short-term thinking. We know for a fact that, especially in recent decades when control of Congress has been constantly up for grabs, this short-term thinking has become Congress's defining defect.

For individual members, short-term-ism warps incentives toward fundraising – and the special interests who can deliver it. Members spend less time legislating and more time raising money – both for their own re-elections and for the political action committees specifically designed to finance their careerist ambitions.

As individual members have retreated from their legislative responsibilities, party leaders have, however poorly, filled that gap. Given *their* incentives, leaders now use the House and Senate not as legislative institutions but as arms of their party campaign committees. The Senate, in particular, no longer functions as a legislative body at all. Leaders of both parties have shut down deliberative floor debate and amendment votes for the sole purpose of shielding Senators from political controversial votes – thereby denying the American people’s right to an accountable legislature.

Members who criticize this dysfunctional, shirts-versus-skins approach are chastised for not being “team players,” and threatened with being cut off from their party leaders’ special-interest fundraising gravy train. Conscience-twining Senators and Representatives are reassured that this process, however imperfect, is simply how they make their way in Washington; in truth, it’s how *Washington* makes its way into *them*.

Lifelong tenure incentivizes members to prioritize the next election over the next generation, and partisanship over statesmanship. It realigns their interests away from the American people, and with The Swamp. The consequences are all around us.

The \$22 trillion national debt. The wasteful pork-barrel programs appropriated specifically to facilitate members’ re-election. The unreformed entitlement programs that both parties know are hurling the nation into insolvency. Congress’s lack of oversight over the sprawling federal bureaucracy. The power of special interests, including the corrupt allure of a lucrative post-congressional career on K Street for members who “play ball.” The total disappearance of the budget process. The breakdown of the legislative process, especially in the Senate. The mindless partisanship. The collapse of public confidence in Congress as an institution.

Term limits would not solve all of these problems by themselves. But they would significantly change incentives throughout the political system. In Washington, fundraising would become less important, and so special interests would be less powerful and partisanship less personally or politically rewarding. Term limits might open up space – now closed – to action on politically thorny issues like entitlement reform, health care, immigration, and budget reform.

By closing off avenues to *be* something important, term limits might reintroduce Senators and Representatives to the appeal of *doing* something important – for their constituents, for their country, and for themselves. The end result would be a more accountable, a more statesmanlike, and in time, a more trusted and respected Congress.