

Frequently Asked Questions about Term Limits

How many states have legislative term limits?

Presently, [15 states](#) have term limits for legislators. In all 21 states have passed legislative term limits at one time or another, but the limits have been repealed or declared unconstitutional in six of those states. In Massachusetts and Washington, they were held unconstitutional by the state supreme courts in the late 1990s. [Oregon's](#) supreme court held that state's legislative term limits unconstitutional in 2002, and the state legislatures in [Idaho](#) and [Utah](#) repealed term limits in 2002 and 2003, respectively. [Wyoming's](#) term limits were held unconstitutional by the state's supreme court in May 2004.

Why don't more states have legislative term limits?

Most of the states that have term limits got them through the citizen initiative process. Only [24 states](#) have the initiative process, and nearly all of those already have term limits or have voted them down already. Two initiative states - Alaska and Illinois - have never voted on legislative term limits because their initiative process includes restrictions that preclude such a measure from making it to the ballot. Two other initiative states - Mississippi and North Dakota - have voted on legislative term limits in the past, and the measures failed to pass. In states without the initiative process, it would require an act of the legislature to create term limits. This has happened just twice - the Louisiana legislature voted to impose term limits on itself in 1995 (Louisiana is the only term limits state that does not have the initiative process), and the Utah legislature voted in 1994 to impose term limits on itself. The Utah move was an effort to head off a more restrictive term limits ballot initiative, and the Utah legislature has since voted to [repeal](#) its term limits.

What are the effects of term limits on state legislatures?

It is difficult to draw general conclusions about the effects of term limits, because there is significant variation not only among the types of legislatures that have term limits, but also among the limits themselves. For instance, the way term limits affect a large, professionalized legislature like California is very different from the way they affect a smaller, part-time legislature like Arkansas. More restrictive limits, like California's lifetime limit of 6 years in the Assembly and 8 in the senate, tend to produce more dramatic results than less restrictive limits, like Colorado's consecutive limit of 8 years in each chamber. NCSL, in cooperation with the Council of State Governments, the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, and a group of legislative scholars from around the country, is currently engaged in a major study of the effects of term limits. Results of the study will be published in late 2004. For information on the study, visit the home page of the [Joint Project on Term Limits](#).

For More Information on Term Limits

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