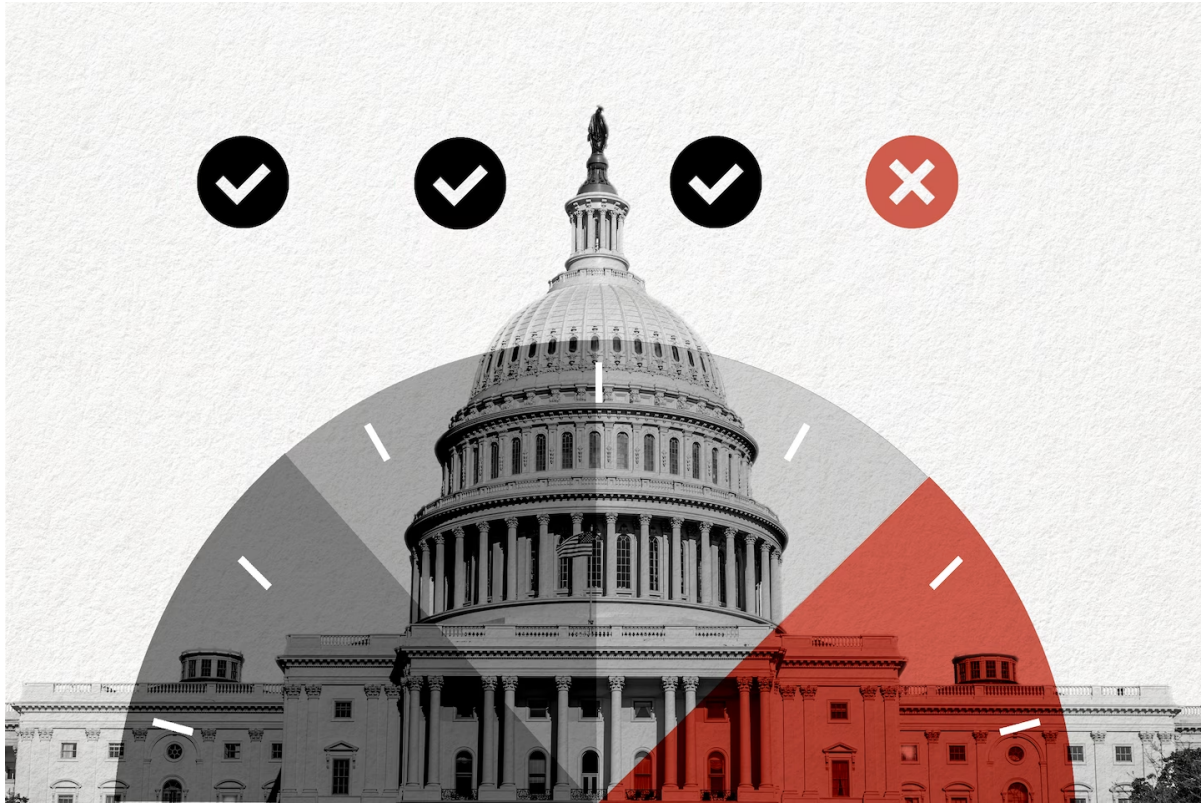


Term limits would upend Congress as we know it

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Congressional term limits have turned into something of a rallying cry this year for Americans across the political spectrum, percolating on social media and cable news every time the nation gets a [stark reminder](#) of the advancing [age](#) and [frailty](#) of [its top leaders](#).

Riding that wave of interest, a group of House Republicans — who were back in Washington this week after summer recess — are looking to bring a proposed constitutional amendment on term limits to a floor vote this session.

Such an amendment has little chance of garnering the two-thirds majority vote needed for ratification, let alone passing in three-fourths of the state legislatures. But if it did, it would render the legislative branch as we know it unrecognizable.

The most popular term-limit proposal, sponsored by Rep. Ralph Norman (R-S.C.) and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), would cap representatives at three terms and senators at two. (A House term is two years, and a Senate term is six. For members appointed or elected to fill a vacancy, the proposal would count a full term as serving more than one year in the House or three years in the Senate.)

As the chart above shows, more than half of sitting representatives have already crossed the three-term threshold — and many have served much longer than that. Former House speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who [announced her bid for reelection this month](#), is in her 19th term. Reps. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) and Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.) are in their 22nd.

Democrats outnumber Republicans 121 to 105 among House members who have served more than three terms. The gap is proportionally even wider in the uppermost ranks: Among the members who are in their 15th term or above, 17 are Democrats and three are Republicans.

More than five dozen members of the House are in their third term.

The youngest is Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), 33, and the oldest is Rep. Jim Baird (R-Ind.), 78. Most are between 40 and 60.

In the Senate, most members are in either their first or second term. Forty-two have served longer than that.

Cruz will complete his second term after the upcoming election. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who at 52 is on the chamber's younger side, is in his third term. Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), whose freeze-ups this year have [stirred talk](#) of term limits, is in his seventh term, and Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) is in his eighth, making him the longest-serving senator.

An amendment like the one Norman and Cruz have floated wouldn't instantaneously purge all those lawmakers from office — under their proposal, time served before ratification wouldn't factor into their eligibility for reelection.

But the term-limit clock would start ticking for everyone upon ratification. In other words, House members would be term-limited out of office three terms after the amendment took effect, senators after two. Never again would Congress see a lawmaker tenured as long as Pelosi, Hoyer or Smith.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Depends on whom you ask.

Supporters say term limits would rid Congress of entrenched and ineffectual career politicians, replacing them with "[citizen lawmakers](#)" who are more in touch with the world outside Washington. Some have also floated term limits as a way to make Congress younger — or, in the [words](#) of Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.), "end the establishment gerontocracy." For lawmakers like Norman, himself in his fourth term, it's a matter of principle, too.

"Elected office should represent a short-term privilege of public service, not a career choice," Norman said in a [statement](#) earlier this year. "Those of us in Congress ought to serve for a reasonable period of time and then return home to live under the laws we enacted."

Term limits also have broad bipartisan support among Americans. A [February survey](#) out of the University of Maryland found that 83 percent of registered voters — including 86 percent of Republicans and 80 percent of Democrats — supported a constitutional amendment restricting how long members can serve. A majority of respondents said they believed that incumbents have too much security in their seats, reducing their need to be responsive to their constituents, according to the survey.

But policy experts on the right and left say experience matters when you're running a country as complex and powerful as this one. Newcomers don't have the relationships or know-how to craft effective policy, they argue, and could very well end up deferring to lobbyists, staffers and officials in other parts of government to get things done.

"You're actually just empowering more of the professional Washington class," said Philip Wallach, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. "The workhorses in Congress know the value of having been there for a long time and they know how to make public policy better because of the expertise they have and the care they've taken to build relationships with other members."

Molly Reynolds, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said term limits could worsen the revolving-door problem between Congress and the private sector.

"It would create more forced opportunities for people to revolve," Reynolds said. "The bottom line is, if you're taking out more experienced members, what's filling the vacuum left by them?"

If term limits were ratified before next fall, everyone elected to the House in 2024 would be out by January 2031, provided they'd served three consecutive terms. The Senate could, in theory, turn over entirely by 2037. That said, there's nothing stopping someone serving one term, leaving government at the end of it, and then returning some time later to run again.

The last time term limits got meaningful attention in Congress was in the mid-1990s, when a new GOP majority made them part of their "Contract With America." A series of votes fell far short of the required supermajority for passage. That's [likely to happen again this time](#).

See how long your representatives have served in Congress using the tables below:

Legislator data comes from the [congress-legislators](#) open-source dataset of members of Congress. Per the language in the bill, this analysis counts serving more than one year in the House or three years in the Senate as a full term.