
The Impact of State Legislative Term Limits on the Competitiveness of Congressional Elections

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of state legislative term limits on the candidacy decisions of challengers in U.S. House elections. Using data from 1996 to 2006, the authors show that the impact of term limits is mitigated by local political factors, such as an incumbent's election margin. The larger the incumbent's previous electoral margin, the lower the likelihood of facing a quality challenger. The authors also identify an unanticipated consequence of term limits: In incumbent races, term limits can generate a substitution effect; as termed out state legislators enter elections, other quality challengers from the same party stay out of the race, as they are unwilling to face a primary in addition to a general election fight. As a result, the increased number of termed out state legislators who seek Congressional office are offset by the reduced number of other quality challengers from nonlegislative offices, resulting in minimally more competitive Congressional elections.

Keywords

term limits, U.S. house elections, quality challengers, candidacy decision, open seats, state legislatures

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This study examines the impact of state legislative term limits on the candidacy decisions of challengers in U.S. House elections. We show that the impact of term limits is shaped by local political factors, such as an incumbent's election margin. Moreover, we identify an unanticipated consequence of term limits: In incumbent races, term limits can generate a substitution effect, as "termed out" state legislators enter primary contexts, whereas other quality (electorally experienced) challengers from the same party, unwilling to face a primary in addition to a general election fight, stay out of the race. Thus, although state legislature term limits change the types of challengers that run against House incumbents, they have little impact on the competitiveness of these elections. Term limits also have no discernable impact in open-seat elections—instead, candidacy decisions are driven by the relatively higher chances of winning the general election in these cases.

These conclusions are based on analysis of challenger candidacy decisions made in U.S. House elections during elections from 1998 to 2006. We code for the presence of a quality challenger of different types, state legislators and local elected officials. Crosstabs suggest that the impact of term limits on candidacy decisions is modest to nonexistent. We then construct a multinomial logit analysis with dependent variables capturing challenger type and district political factors on the right-hand side.

The parameter estimates show that placing term limits on state legislators increases the likelihood that they will run for the House. However, the magnitude of this effect varies with context. In incumbent elections, the impact of term limits on state legislator challenges is higher in districts with electorally vulnerable incumbents. Moreover, this effect is counterbalanced by the negative effect of term limits on the entry of other types of quality challengers. Term limits also have no impact on the likelihood of a quality challenger entering an open seat race.

How Term Limits Matter: Candidacy Decisions in Congressional Elections

As of mid-2009, 20 states, accounting for more than 200 congressional seats, have limited the number of terms of their state legislators. Much work on term limits has focused on their impact on the distribution of power among state legislators, governors, staffers, political parties, and interest groups (Carey, Niemi, & Powell, 1998; Hodson, Jones, Kurtz, & Montcrief, 1995; Katches & Weintraub, 1997). Our analysis centers on whether term limits affect elections at the next rung of the political ladder. State legislative term limits create a supply of electorally experienced individuals who are forced

to find a new venue for political ambition. Previous work (Krasno & Green, 1988) shows that state legislatures supply a high fraction of the quality challengers in congressional elections; about a third of contemporary U.S. House members have state legislative experience. Analysis shows that the presence or absence of a quality challenger is a major determinant of the competitiveness of congressional elections (e.g., Jacobson & Kernell, 1983). Thus, our question: Does an increase in the number of potential quality challengers, born of term limits, increase the number of quality challengers who actually run for Congress, and thereby affect the competitiveness of congressional elections?

Previous work widely supports a positive relationship between term limits and competitiveness. Francis and Kenney (1997) found that in states with term limits, state house members are more likely to run for the state senate than in states without term limits, while Welch and Kiely (1998) reach the same conclusion using case studies. Carey et al. (1998) and Powell (2000) show that state legislators are more likely to run in House elections in states with term limits compared with states where these limits do not exist. Steen (2006) finds that term limits increase the propensity of “termed out” state legislators to run for Congress, as they reduce the opportunity cost of running for higher office, ultimately suggesting that they increase the competitiveness of Congressional elections (for similar arguments, see Berkman, 1994; Doron & Harris, 2001; Moncrief, Thompson, Haddon, & Hoyer, 1992; Mondak, 1995; Opheim, 1994).

Our work begins with three questions. The first is whether the impact of term limits is contextual—does it vary with other factors that shape candidacy decisions? The second brings other quality challengers (mayors, city council members, etc.) into the term limits literature: What effect do term limits have on their candidacy decisions? We begin with the contextual effect of term limits. The third evaluates the relative success rates of these quality challengers: What effect do term limits have on the competitiveness of Congressional elections?

Previous work (Bianco, 1984; Bond, Covington, & Fleisher, 1985; Krasno & Green, 1988; Maddox, 2004; Maisel & Stone, 1997) shows that candidacy decisions are sensitive to factors such as economic conditions, presidential popularity, whether the election involves an incumbent or an open seat, the incumbent’s previous vote margin, and district party balance. If so, then the impact of term limits may be conditional on these factors. That is, term limits may create a supply of quality challengers looking for another political office—but this supply may not translate into actual entry.

For example, suppose a state legislator faces retirement because of term limits and contemplates running for a congressional seat against an incumbent from the other party.¹ Suppose the incumbent received 70% of the vote in the last general election and is a safe bet for another term.² Will the state legislator enter? The costs of running (time, self-financing of a campaign) are nontrivial.³ Under these conditions, we suggest that the state legislator is unlikely to run. Or, to put it another way, the probability of entry is far lower than it would be if the incumbent had squeaked through with only 51% in the last election. And if the congressional seat was open, we suggest that the probability of entry might be higher still—but that other factors, such as the partisan balance in the district, might shape the legislator's candidacy decision.

In sum, we argue that the impact of term limits on the decision to run for higher office will be conditional on other factors that are known to influence candidacy decisions. Our unit of analysis is the Congressional district, and our focus will be on the interaction between term limits and district characteristics. Our first empirical hypothesis will consider the following relationship:

Hypothesis 1: Term limits will increase the probability of state legislators running against a congressional incumbent from the other party only insofar as the incumbent is electorally vulnerable.

Put another way, we expect that electorally safe congressional incumbents have little to fear from the increased supply of potential challengers created by term limits, but vulnerable incumbents may be more likely to face strong opposition insofar as potential challengers are subject to term limits. Following from the literature cited earlier, we expect that for open seats:

Hypothesis 2: Term limits should have little or no impact on the probability that state legislators enter open seat congressional elections.

Our reasoning is simple: Given a careerist, largely electorally safe Congress, open seats represent a once in a generation chance where challengers have a much higher probability of winning a general election. As a result, the candidacy decisions of quality challengers in open seat cases are independent of factors such as economic conditions, even as these factors shape decisions to enter incumbent elections (Bianco, 1984). We expect that under these conditions term limits will be largely (and similarly) irrelevant.

Our analysis also considers the impact of term limits on candidacy decisions by other kinds of quality challengers in congressional elections, such as mayors, local legislators, and so on. We assume that these potential challengers are not subject to term limits themselves.⁴ Rather, our argument is that

insofar as term limits increase the chances that a state legislator runs in a congressional election, these limits lower the expected benefits of entry for other kinds of quality challengers.

Consider the congressional incumbent described earlier. Imagine a local mayor who believes that he/she will be unopposed in the out-party primary and that his/her chances of winning the general election against the incumbent, although small, are high enough that the expected benefits of winning outweigh the costs. Under these conditions, we would expect the mayor to enter the race. In contrast, suppose that the mayor is in a state with term limits on state legislators and anticipates that a local state legislator will enter the race, either because the legislator faces mandatory retirement or because the legislator anticipates having to leave his/her current position in a term or two. This change radically changes the mayor's calculus. Rather than having a clear shot at his/her party's nomination, he/she will have to run in a contested primary just to win the right to compete against the incumbent. Under these conditions, it would be no surprise to find that the mayor decides against running, on grounds that a contested primary against a politically experienced challenger increased the costs of running and reduced the combined probability of winning office.

As we will show, this possibility is not abstract: Across more than 100 incumbent races with quality challenger opposition, there are only 10 cases where more than one quality candidate entered an out-party primary for the nomination against a congressional incumbent.

More generally, we expect:

Hypothesis 3: Insofar as term limits increase the probability that state legislators run against congressional incumbents, they will produce a corresponding decrease in the probability of entry for other quality challengers.

Put another way, our expectation is that term limits may change the mix of quality challengers who run for the House but have no effect on the aggregate number or in the probability of a quality challenger in a given race.

Turning from candidacy decisions to election outcomes, we consider the influence of term limits on the electoral success of quality challengers in their bid for Congressional office. Our expectation is as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Term limits will have a positive effect on the likelihood that a quality challenger will defeat an incumbent in the general election.

Our reasoning is simple: Term limits increase the likelihood that quality challengers will run campaigns against Congressional incumbents, particularly vulnerable ones. Although the ability to mount a serious challenge

against an incumbent is largely dependent on the partisan characteristics of the district, a race is not likely to be competitive if the incumbent does not face a quality challenger in the general election. We expect that state legislators make better Congressional challengers than other elected officials do, as the skill set developed in the campaigning for the state legislature translate much more easily into Congressional campaigns.⁵ Thus, by increasing the supply of challengers with state legislative experience, term limits similarly increase the likelihood that a challenger defeat an incumbent.

Model and Data

Our analysis focuses on congressional elections from 1998 to 2006. For each incumbent and open-seat race, we gathered data in the electoral experience of each challenger⁶ (general election challengers in incumbent elections and challengers on both sides of open-seat races).

Following Jacobson and Kernell (1983) and many others (e.g., Carson, 2005; Carson, Engstrom, & Roberts, 2005; Hetherington, Larson, & Gobletti, 2003; Van Dunk, 1997), we code an individual as a quality challenger if he or she either held public office at the time of the election. As Goodliffe (2004) discusses in greater detail, although the dichotomous measure is somewhat imprecise, more nuanced measures of challenger quality (see Canon, 1990; Krasno, 1994; Krasno & Green, 1988) come at significant cost while, at best, resulting in only a marginal improvement in results.⁷

We divide quality challengers into two groups: state legislators and all other candidates with elective office experience.⁸ We divide the election data into two parts: incumbent elections and open seat elections.

As an illustration of the data, Figure 1 reports candidacy decisions in incumbent races from 1998 through 2006. We divide the cases into three groups based on the party balance of the congressional district and based on whether state legislators in the member's district faced term limits. For each category, we report whether the incumbent was opposed by no quality challenger, a state legislator, a local elected official, or both.

The first thing to note is that there are relatively few districts (10) with multiple quality candidates in an out-party congressional primary. This finding is consistent with our argument about substitution effects: The odds of beating a congressional incumbent, even a vulnerable incumbent, are low enough that potential candidates almost always refuse to enter if they will face serious primary opposition, regardless of whether they face term limits or not.

Figure 1 also shows that quality challengers are relatively rare in incumbent elections. Even among vulnerable incumbents, almost 80% had no electorally experienced challenger.

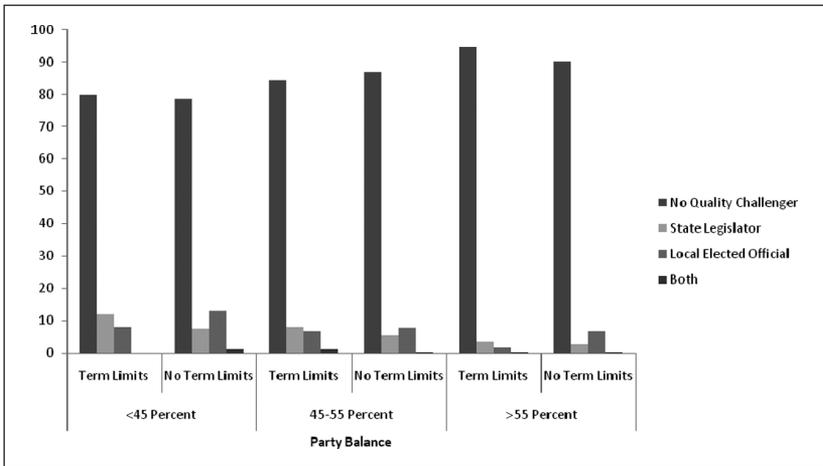


Figure 1. Challengers in incumbent U.S. House elections, 105th to 109th U.S. House

Figure 1 also supports our two propositions about term limits. Term limits appear to (modestly) increase the likelihood that state legislators enter incumbent races and reduce (again, modestly) the likelihood that other elected officials enter. However, the net effect is quite low.

Figure 2 gives similar data for open seat elections. In it, we divided the cases into three groups based on the partisan balance of the district and whether state legislators in the district faced term limits. For each of these cases, we report those where no quality challenger ran for a party’s nomination, those where one state legislator ran, those where one local elected official ran, or those where multiple quality challengers ran. The data suggest that the impact of term limits on competitiveness in open seat elections is quite trivial.

Multivariate Analysis: Model and Independent Variables

In our analysis, the unit of analysis is a congressional district in a particular year. For incumbent elections, we specify an unordered multinomial logit model that models the likelihood that a congressional incumbent’s reelection bid will be challenged by an out-party quality candidate.

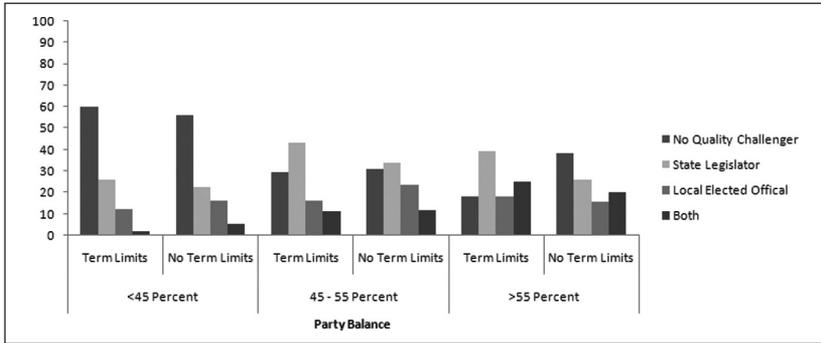


Figure 2. Challengers in open seat Congressional elections, 105th to 109th U.S. House

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Challenger Type} = & a + B_1 (\text{Term Limits}) + B_2 (\text{Party Balance}) \\
 & + B_3 (\text{Prev. Vote}) + B_4 (\text{Termed-Out Legislator Pool}) \\
 & + B_5 (\text{Professionalism}) + B_6 (\text{106th House}) \\
 & + B_7 (\text{107th House}) + B_8 (\text{108th House}) \\
 & + B_9 (\text{109th House}) \\
 & + B_{10} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 1998}) \\
 & + B_{11} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2000}) \\
 & + B_{12} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2002}) \\
 & + B_{13} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2004}) \\
 & + B_{14} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2006}) + \text{error}
 \end{aligned}$$

We estimate this equation once for an outcome where a state legislator enters the general election and once when some other quality challenger runs. (There are not enough cases to analyze outcomes where multiple quality challengers enter—we omit these cases from the analysis.) The “no quality challenger” outcome is the reference category.

The independent variables are as follows:

- *Term limits.* This equals 1 if the congressional district was in a state that had term limits on state legislators, and 0 otherwise. (More complicated specifications that accounted for future term limits yielded insignificant results, and are omitted.)
- *Party balance.* This variable is the district’s support for the last presidential candidate of the incumbent’s party. The use of district support for presidential candidates as a measure of district partisanship has been used extensively in the literature (see Ansolabehere, Snyder & Stewart, 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan, 2002; Erikson & Wright, 2001).

- *Previous vote.* This variable is the incumbent's vote in the last election. We expect it will be negatively related to entry—the safer the incumbent, the less likely a quality challenger of any kind will enter.
- *Termed-out legislator pool.* This variable is calculated as the number of out-party state legislators who were termed out of the legislature in the election year, divided by number of Congressional districts in the state.⁹
- *State legislature professionalism.* This variable, taken from Squire (2007), measures the professionalism of the state legislature and is included as a control.
- *106th House-109th House.* These dummy variables are included to capture any systematic differences challenger candidacy decisions throughout the series.
- *Republican incumbent in 1998-2006.* We expect different patterns across different years to favor one party or the other. These dummy variables are included to capture any systematic differences in challenger decisions to oppose a Republican incumbent in any particular election.

For open seat congressional elections, we use a similar multinomial logit model, with three differences. First, we analyze both party primaries—given 183 total open seats, we have 366 cases (two parties per district) in our analysis. Second, we estimate three equations not two; as there are a significant proportion of elections where multiple quality challengers ran, we can estimate the impact of term limits on the likelihood of this outcome. Third, we use a slightly different set of independent variables:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Challenger Type} = & a + B_1 (\text{Term Limits}) + B_2 (\text{Party Balance}) \\ & + B_4 (\text{Termed-Out Legislator Pool}) \\ & + B_5 (\text{Professionalism}) + B_6 (106\text{th House}) \\ & + B_7 (107\text{th House}) + B_8 (108\text{th House}) \\ & + B_9 (109\text{th House}) + \text{error} \end{aligned}$$

All the independent variables are specified exactly the same as in the incumbent equation except for party balance. In the incumbent elections equation, party balance captured the district's support for the incumbent's party. Here, party balance captures the district's support for the challenger's party. Our expectations for the parameters in this equation are the same as in the incumbent analysis, with two exceptions. First, party balance should be positively related to the entry of a quality challenger. Second, term limits are expected to have no impact on competitiveness, either in general or in districts where the parties are roughly equal in strength.

Term limits and the probability of challenger victory. To evaluate the effect of term limits on the electoral success of quality challengers in incumbent elections, we use a standard logit model, where the dependent variable is a challenger victory in a given Congressional election. The model specification is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Challenger Victory} = & a + B_1 (\text{Term Limits}) + B_2 (\text{Party Balance}) \\ & + B_3 (\text{Prev. Vote}) + B_4 (\text{Professionalism}) \\ & + B_5 (\text{State Legislator Challenger}) \\ & + B_6 (\text{Other Quality Challenger}) \\ & + B_7 (\text{106th House}) + B_8 (\text{107th House}) \\ & + B_9 (\text{108th House}) + B_{10} (\text{109th House}) \\ & + B_{11} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 1998}) \\ & + B_{12} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2000}) \\ & + B_{13} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2002}) \\ & + B_{14} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2004}) \\ & + B_{15} (\text{Republican Incumbent in 2006}) + \text{error} \end{aligned}$$

All variables are specified as they were in the above equations. We expect that the term limits variable will be positively related to challenger victory, as will state legislator challenger and other quality challenger. However, we expect that the size of the coefficient for state legislator challenger will be larger than the coefficient for other quality challenger. We expect that party balance and previous vote will both be negative, as the safer the incumbent is entering an election, the more likely he/she should be to win that election.

To evaluate the effect of term limits on the electoral success of quality challengers in open seat elections, we use a similar model, with slightly different independent variables:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Challenger Victory} = & a + B_1 (\text{Term Limits}) + B_2 (\text{Party Balance}) \\ & + B_3 (\text{Professionalism}) \\ & + B_4 (\text{State Legislator Challenger}) \\ & + B_5 (\text{Other Quality Challenger}) \\ & + B_6 (\text{106th House}) + B_7 (\text{107th House}) \\ & + B_8 (\text{108th House}) + B_9 (\text{109th House}) + \text{error} \end{aligned}$$

Our expectations for the open seat election equations are somewhat different than were those with the incumbent elections. First, recall that the party balance variable captures the district's support for the challenger's party, and as such, we expect this coefficient to be positive. Second, as specified before, we expect that the term limits variable will be insignificant, as open seat elections are already competitive. Third, we expect quality challengers to have a higher likelihood of winning elections than those challengers without electoral

experience. However, within this subset, we expect that state legislators will have a higher likelihood of winning than other quality challengers do.

Results

Term Limits and the Probability of Quality Challenger Emergence

Parameters for the regression model predicting incumbent opposition by a quality challenger are given in Table 1. The term limits variable is strongly significant in both equations. However, the parameters are oppositely signed and somewhat close in size, though the value is greater for “other quality challenger” than it is for “state legislative challenger.” These results are what we should expect given there is a substantial substitution effect between term-limited state legislators and other types of quality challengers. The other parameters are no surprise. The incumbent’s previous vote is negatively related to the emergence of both types of challengers. Party balance is similarly negatively related to the emergence of either type of challenger. The only control that is significant is the 108th House term in the local elected official regression, and this largely seems to be an anomaly.

Figure 3 gives an interpretation of these figures, showing how the probability that a state legislator will enter against a congressional incumbent varies with previous vote margin and whether the state legislator faces term limits.

All other independent variables are at the sample means. The plots show clear evidence of the contextual impact of term limits. Although term limits increase the probability that state legislators enter, the magnitude of the increase depends on the incumbent’s political safety, as measured by their vote margin in the previous election. The impact of term limits is much higher against vulnerable incumbents compared with safe incumbents.

Figure 3 tells only part of the story. The parameters show that term limits increase the probability of entry by state legislators and reduce the probability of entry for other quality challengers. Figure 4 aggregates these two effects. The top line gives the impact of term limits on the probability that a congressional incumbent will be challenged in his/her reelection bid by an out-party state legislator. (Put another way, this plot gives the difference between the two lines in Figure 3.) The bottom plot gives the same difference for the probability of an incumbent facing other types of quality challengers—note that this plot is negative, reflecting the negative impact of term limits on entry of other quality challengers. The middle line, labeled *net effect*, shows the overall effect that term limits have on the aggregate probability of entry by a quality challenger.¹⁰ Again, note that this plot is negative, indicating that overall, term limits reduce the likelihood that an incumbent will be opposed by a quality challenger.

Table 1. Parameters for Multinomial Logit Regression of Incumbent Congressional Elections

Variable	State Legislator Only	Other Quality Challenger Only
Term limits	0.619* (.32)	-0.956* (.28)
Party balance	-5.16* (1.4)	-2.87* (.75)
Incumbent's vote share	-4.41* (1.3)	-4.32* (1.16)
Termed-out legislator pool	0.087* (.043)	0.080 (.04)
State legislator professionalism	-4.56* (1.1)	0.273 (.61)
106th house	0.159 (.46)	-0.993 (.52)
107th house	-0.788 (.63)	-0.075 (.45)
108th house	0.162 (.42)	0.841* (.41)
109th house	-0.080 (.43)	0.136 (.42)
Republican incumbent 1998	-0.693 (.47)	-0.575 (.36)
Republican incumbent 2000	-0.196 (.48)	0.339 (.49)
Republican incumbent 2002	0.024 (.73)	-0.525 (.47)
Republican incumbent 2004	-0.060 (.44)	-0.265 (.36)
Republican incumbent 2006	0.280 (.42)	0.596 (.34)
Constant	3.59* (.96)	1.89* (.81)
N	1,982	
Wald chi-square	213.47	

Note: Two-tail significance levels are denoted * $p < .05$. Standard errors are clustered by state-year.

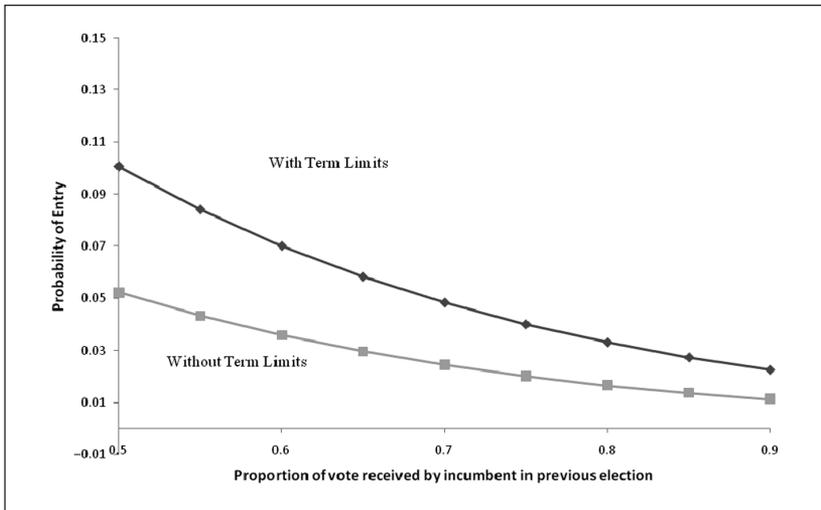


Figure 3. The impact of term limits on state legislator entry against congressional incumbent

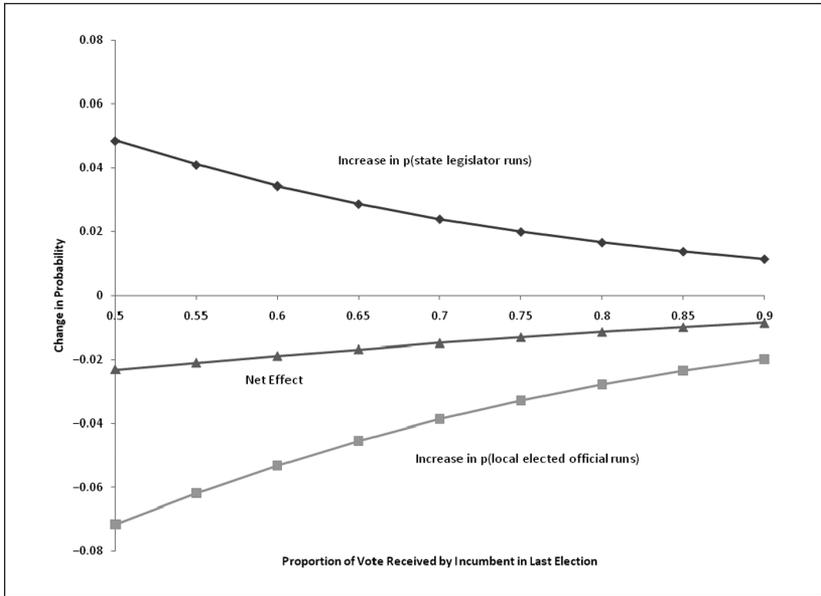


Figure 4. The impact of term limits on candidacy decisions

Figure 4 shows clear evidence of substitution effects. Term limits on state legislators (modestly) increase the probability that they run against congressional incumbents. However, entry by these candidates effectively crowds out other quality challengers. The result is a change in the mix of congressional challengers—more state legislators, fewer candidates with other types of elected office experience—and fewer quality challengers overall.

Open seats. Parameters for the open-seat regressions are given in Table 2. Overall, most parameter estimates are as expected: district party balance is statistically significant and large in all cases—as a party’s strength increases, so does the likelihood that a quality challenger vies for the party’s nomination.

However, there is one surprise: The size and significance and negative sign of the *term limits* variable in predicting likelihood of an “other quality challenger” entering the race indicate that even in open seat elections, the presence of term limits reduce the likelihood that a quality challenger without state legislative experience will enter the race. Unlike our findings in incumbency elections, this parameter estimate does not have a corresponding

Table 2. Parameters for Multinomial Logit Regression of Open Seat Congressional Election Primaries

Variable	State Legislator Only	Other Quality Challenger Only	Multiple Quality Challengers
Term limits	.749 (.46)	-1.80* (.74)	.603 (.57)
Party balance	4.90* (1.27)	4.54* (1.3)	9.44* (1.85)
Termed out legislator pool	-.014 (.015)	.066* (.02)	-.005 (.019)
State legislator professionalism	.125 (.75)	-.508 (1.1)	-1.92 (1.53)
106th house	-.579 (.37)	-2.64* (.73)	-.850 (.59)
107th house	-.452 (.41)	-.618 (.47)	-.611 (.53)
108th house	-.645 (.36)	-.519 (.41)	-1.41* (.67)
109th house	-.791 (.47)	-.597 (.53)	-3.22* (1.09)
Constant	-2.32* (.68)	-2.22* (.85)	-4.77* (1.1)
N		366	
Wald chi-square		73.51	

Note: Two-tail significance levels are denoted * $p < .05$. Standard errors are clustered by state-year.

increase in probability of observing a race with a state legislator alone. As such, term limits appear to have a “scare off” effect, without evidence of a substitution effect.¹¹

Term Limits and the Probability of Challenger Victory

Turning now to consider the electoral implications that term limits have on the likelihood of a challenger’s success in an incumbent election,¹² the results from the logit model are presented in Table 3. Contrary to our expectations, term limits appear to have no effect on the likelihood of an incumbent losing in a congressional election. Our coefficient estimates for party balance and incumbent vote are negative, large, and statistically significant—as we would expect. The larger the incumbent’s previous vote margin the less likely a challenger is to win, regardless of previous political experience.

The coefficient estimates for state legislator challenger and other quality challenger are positive, statistically significant, and nearly equal in size. This surprising result indicates that state legislator challengers and other quality challengers are equally likely to defeat a congressional incumbent, though the odds of defeating an incumbent are nonetheless quite small.

Additional analysis (omitted due to space, available from the authors) shows that in open seat elections, the likelihood of victory is far higher for a

Table 3. Parameters for Logit Regression of Challenger Victory in Incumbent Congressional Elections

Variable	Coefficient Estimates
Term limits	-0.738 0.53
Party balance	-4.34* 1.94
Incumbent's vote share	-6.77* 2.72
State legislator professionalism	0.246 1.54
State legislator challenger	1.82* 0.43
Other quality challenger	1.84* 0.51
106th house	0.162 -0.25
107th house	0.872 0.71
108th house	0.155 0.14
109th house	0.251 -0.36
Republican incumbent 1998	0.282 0.62
Republican incumbent 2000	0.454 0.74
Republican incumbent 2002	0.805 0.69
Republican incumbent 2004	-0.046 .92
Republican incumbent 2006	2.30* 0.61
Constant	1.32 1.44
N	1982
Wald chi-square	156.79

Note: Two-tail significance levels are denoted * $p < .05$. Standard errors are clustered by state-year.

challenger with state legislative experience than it is for any other type of challenger in an open seat election. The insignificance of the term limits coefficient indicates that open seat elections are not affected by state legislative term limits.

Discussion

Our work makes four important points that have been previously overlooked in the term limits literature. First, we have shown that the impact of term limits on entry decisions in congressional primaries varies with context. For out-party challenges against congressional incumbents, term limits increase the probability of entry by state legislators. However, the magnitude of this difference depends on political support for the incumbent: term limits have a larger effect when an incumbent is electorally vulnerable compared with when he or she is electorally safe.

Second, these results provide new insight into attempts to increase the competitiveness of congressional elections. Proponents of term limits are right that mandatory retirement of state legislators increases the number of politically experienced potential challengers in congressional elections. However, given an electorally safe congressional incumbent, the problem for proponents of competitiveness is not a lack of potential challengers—rather, the problem is that the chances of unseating the incumbent are extremely low, regardless of the recruitment pool. Term limits only force state legislators from office; they do not guarantee that these individuals will decide to seek a different elected office.

Third, we have also shown that although term limits increase the probability that state legislators challenge congressional incumbents, they also reduce by a nearly equal amount the probability that other types of quality challengers enter these races. The result is that term limits have essentially no impact on the competitiveness of incumbent congressional elections. Why? Because challenges against congressional incumbents have low prospects for success. Even if a challenger is willing to enter the race given the poor prospects, the prospect of a competitive primary is enough to make the costs of running outweigh the benefits. Put another way, when a congressional incumbent runs for reelection, there is room for only one quality challenger. Thus, even though term limits increase the number of potential quality challengers, they do not increase the number of such challengers who actually enter a race for Congress.

Fourth, we find that term limits have very little effect on the likelihood that a challenger will be successful in his or her bid for congressional office. Furthermore, we find that state legislators and other elected officials have approximately the same likelihood of defeating an incumbent in a congressional election. This pattern does not hold for open seat elections, however. Although we find that term limits have little effect on open seat elections as well, our results indicate that state legislators are significantly more successful in winning their open seat election bids than other quality challengers are.

Appendix

Summary Statistics

Continuous Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Median	Maximum
Party balance	0.548	0.12	0.12	0.54	0.95
Previous vote	0.68	0.13	0.26	0.66	1
Termed out legislator pool	0.64	1.94	0	0	33
Professionalism	0.28	0.17	0.03	0.22	0.63
Dichotomous Variables	# Obs				
Incumbent elections	1,992				
Open Seat elections	183				
Challengers with state legislative experience	110				
Challengers with other elected experience	150				
Republican incumbents in 1998	211				
Republican incumbents in 2000	197				
Republican incumbents in 2002	188				
Republican incumbents in 2004	204				
Republican incumbents in 2006	209				

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Notes

1. We focus on candidacy decisions involving challenges across party lines because primary contests involving a congressional incumbent and a quality challenger are rare (none in the 105th and 106th House). Presumably this pattern reflects the fact that within-party challenges offer even lower chances of success than across party lines, suggesting that the impact of term limits will be nonexistent.
2. Jacobson (1987) shows that 1980-era incumbents who received more than 70% of the vote in the last election were defeated less than 1% of the time, whereas incumbents who received less than 55% of the vote were defeated about 15% of the time.
3. See Maddox (2004) and Lazarus (2006) for a discussion of state legislator career paths and the impact of term limits on career decisions.

4. Although local term limits exist, they are far less common than in state legislatures (www.termlimits.org). Thus, our argument captures the overwhelming central tendency in our data.
5. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.
6. We collected data from five sources: *Biographical Directory of the US Congress, 1774 to Present*, the “Political Graveyard” Web site, Barone and Cohen’s biennial *The Almanac of American Politics*, The Library of Congress’ Web Archives of Election Information, and Google searches. Candidates for whom we could not find background information on were deemed to be politically inexperienced.
7. For further defense of the dichotomous measure for challenger quality, see Goidel and Gross (1994).
8. Our analysis does not distinguish between districts in which legislators were already subject to term limits and districts where limits were scheduled to go into effect at a later date. We checked for differences along these lines and found none.
9. Ideally, our measure would also control for the location of residences, to determine how many state legislators are actually in a position to run for a particular congressional seat. Even so, such data would fail to capture the possibility that a state legislator would change residences as a prelude to entry. Ultimately, we anticipate that our existing measure, which takes the partisanship of termed out legislators into account, is nonetheless effective.
10. We calculate this probability by subtracting the decrease in the probability of entry by local elected officials from the increase in the probability of state legislator entry. We get virtually the same result if we simply estimate the probability of quality challenger entry using the exogenous variables in Table 2; however, the method employed allows us to break down the effect into its constituent parts rather than merely relying on the aggregate measure.
11. An analysis of a reduced form equation does not find any evidence that open seat elections are endogenously determined by the presence of term limits.
12. We conducted an alternative analysis predicting the likelihood that the margin of victory in the election is less than 10%. It yields nearly identical results as the analysis for likelihood of challenger victory—the coefficient for term limits is again small in size and insignificant, whereas the size of the coefficients for state legislators and other quality challengers are positive, equal in size, and statistically significant.

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