



Former Michigan Legislators Overwhelmingly Favor Reforming or Abolishing Term Limits

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Key Findings

From a 2020–21 survey of former Michigan state legislators regarding lessons learned from their time in office, and their views on the state’s legislative term limits:

- Former Michigan legislators who have left office or have been term-limited out overwhelmingly favor reforming (67%) or even abolishing (27%) the state’s legislative term limits. This is true regardless of their party identification or gender, with overwhelming support among both male and female Republican and Democratic former legislators.
- The most common approach suggested for reform is to extend the allowable time in office, with 12 years as the most common target mentioned. Adding flexibility to serve that time in either house, in any combination, is another common reform suggestion.
- Most of the former legislators felt they had accomplished at least some of their goals during their term-limited time in office, but most would opt to serve again, if given the opportunity.

Background

Michigan voters approved a statewide ballot initiative in 1992 with 59% support to institute term limits on elected offices at the state and federal levels, including for Governor and Lt. Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, and members of the state legislature, as well as Michigan's seats in Congress. Subsequently the limits on congressional seats were ruled unconstitutional¹, leaving just the state-level limits in place.

Across the country 36 states have term limits on their Governor's Office², 16 have limits for the offices of Attorney General³ and Secretary of State⁴, and 15 have limits on state legislators⁵. However, Michigan's limits have been called among the strictest in the nation⁶, with caps of two four-year terms for the executive branch offices and in the Senate, and three two-year terms in the House.

The Citizens Research Council of Michigan published findings by researchers at Wayne State University in 2018 that identified numerous concerns about the impact of term limits, including that they had failed to achieve proponents' original goals to remove career politicians, increase the diversity of elected officials, and make elections more competitive, among other shortcomings.⁷

Meanwhile, a recent national poll found general public support for term limits remains robust, including two-thirds of respondents expressing support for new term limits on U.S. Supreme Court justices, with support from both Democratic (82%) and Republican (57%) voters.⁸

And now voters in Michigan have a choice again regarding potential reform of the state's limits on legislative offices, in Proposal 1, which was placed on the 2022 ballot by the legislature itself. If passed by the voters, Proposal 1 would subject state legislators to a 12-year term limit, which could be served in any combination across both the state House and Senate. It would also institute new financial disclosure requirements for elected state officials, addressing one of Michigan's major policy shortcomings in its current lack of such disclosure regulations.⁹

To learn more about the views of former state legislators—many of whom were term-limited out of office—a survey was conducted in 2020 and 2021 by Rusty Hills with support from Delaney Walsh as part of the University of Michigan's Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. Three hundred and eight former officials were contacted, and 110 participated in the survey, resulting in a response rate of approximately 36% (note: breakdowns of responses into subgroups results in small numbers of respondents in some cases, and the findings in this report use unweighted data). This policy brief highlights key findings about the former legislators' lessons from serving in Lansing and their views on term limits.

Overwhelming Support to Reform or Abolish Term Limits

Among responding former legislators, 67% favor reforming Michigan’s current legislative term limits, while 27% would repeal the limits entirely, and 6% would leave the limits as they are currently constituted (see *Figure 1*).

While there are some differences in these views when broken down by the party affiliation of the former legislators, large majorities of both groups support either reforming or abolishing the state’s current legislative term limits. Among Republican respondents, 10% would leave the limits as they are, while 74% would reform them, and 16% would abolish them. By comparison, none of the Democratic respondents would leave the current limits as they are, while 50% would reform them and the remaining 50% would fully abolish them (see *Figure 2*).

Overwhelming support for reforming or abolishing the limits is also found regardless of gender. Among male former legislators, 69% would reform the limits, while 23% would abolish them and just 8% would leave them as they are currently. Among female former legislators, 61% would reform the limits, while 39% would abolish them, and none would leave them as they are today.

Figure 1
Former legislators’ support for reforming, repealing, or leaving term limits as they are

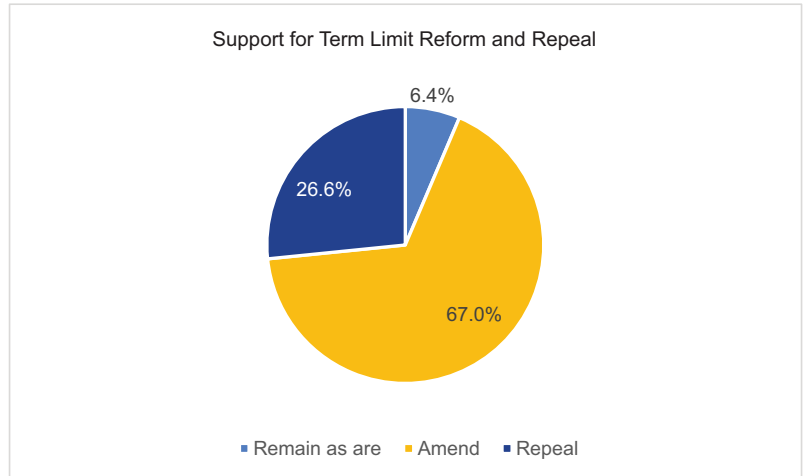
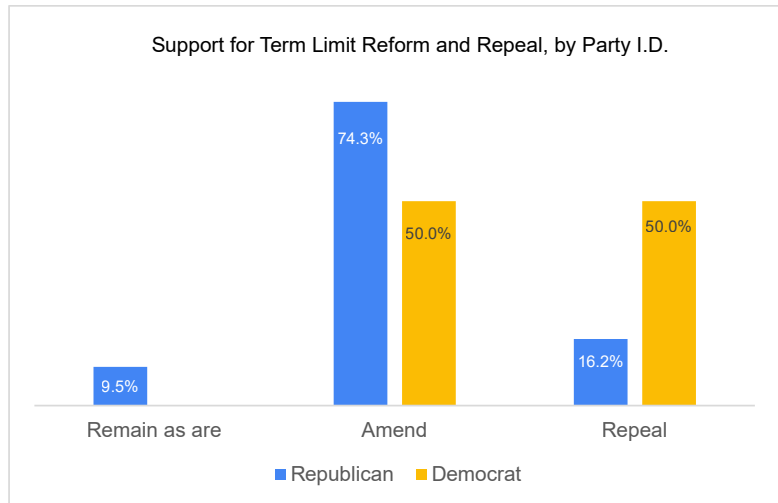


Figure 2
Former legislators’ support for reforming, repealing, or leaving term limits as they are, by partisan affiliation



Suggested Reforms Focus on Extending Allowable Time in Office

The survey included an open-ended question, asking those respondents who believe Michigan's current legislative term limits should be reformed exactly how they would suggest reforming them. Among these 73 respondents, the most common suggestion, mentioned by 65 former legislators, is to extend the number of years that legislators are allowed to serve, up from the current six years in the House and eight in the Senate. Many of these comments suggested limits of twelve years, though suggestions included other timespans including ten, eighteen, and twenty years.

Another common suggestion is to introduce flexibility within the overall limits, such that legislators could serve in either the House, the Senate, or both, in any combination of time periods up to the overall limit.

Both suggestions match the potential reform in Proposal 1 on the 2022 ballot.

Other common suggestions include extending the terms of office themselves, beyond the current two-year periods for the house and four-year periods for the Senate, often proposed to reduce the amount of time spent campaigning for reelection.

Most Legislators Accomplished at Least Some Goals, Would Serve Again if Possible

Overall, 46% of former legislators said they had accomplished at least some of their goals during their term-limited time in office, while another 47% felt they accomplished most of their goals. Only 7% felt they had accomplished few or almost none of their goals.

Meanwhile, 68% said they would run for legislative office again if they had not been subject to term limits.

Many Lessons Learned from Time in Office

The survey asked several questions about lessons the former legislators learned from their time in office, and how they might approach the job differently if they had the opportunity to serve again.

One question asked about relationships with lobbyists and found 78% of respondents wouldn't do anything differently in spending time with lobbyists, while 16% would spend more time with lobbyists because of their greater knowledge of specific issues, and just 6% would spend less time with lobbyists because they are paid to advocate for a specific point of view and issue. Comments included that lobbyists do have valuable information, often represent issues important to their constituents, and are a relatively easy source from which to hear various sides of an issue. Others suggested that reliance on non-partisan offices such as the Legislative Service Bureau and the House and Senate Fiscal Agencies should be increased.

Other questions asked what the former legislators liked and disliked most about their experiences. The most common "dislikes" about their time in office included partisanship and political games, the limited time in office, fundraising and reelection campaigning as well as travel, nepotism, and the influence of special interests and lobbyists. Among female former legislators, gender bias was the most common negative experience mentioned, but the wider set of most common dislikes identified above were mentioned by former legislators of all stripes, regardless of their partisan affiliation or gender.

By comparison, the most common "likes" included serving constituents, making a difference, relationships, problem solving, and building new skills. Again, most of these were mentioned by both male and female Republican and Democratic former legislators.

In Their Own Words

Examples of advice from former legislators for future legislators

“Voting priorities should be convictions, constitution, constituents, common sense, the caucus.”

“Learn the system before you go. Run for local office. Spend some time there watching and learning how government works, or doesn't. See which tactics succeed or fail to reach positive solutions. Learn to deal with bullies. There are a lot of them in politics.”

“Write down your personal convictions; those beliefs you would die for. Hold yourself accountable to never violate them. Know the Michigan and US Constitutions, and your oath of office. Hold yourself accountable to never violate that oath. Within these confines always represent your District. Beware of the seductions of your position. Never give away your integrity or violate your word. Never forget to be amazed with your privilege to serve in the Legislature, and make sure you enjoy and experience it to the fullest.”

“You have achieved a great honor, do something good.”

“Check your political agenda at the door. Residents want public servants not politicians. Vote your District.”

“Find good staff. Legislators, no matter how smart or hard working, cannot begin to digest all of the information that will cross their desk every week. Your office staff, caucus staff and non-partisan analysts are essential to your understanding of issues.”

“Term limits require a legislator to focus on a few issues and quickly become an expert on them in order to be effective. In addition, take time to read bills and amendments, because others won't do that....by doing so, you will develop a reputation for thoroughness and colleagues will defer to your judgement.”

“Learn the rules of procedure; study committee agenda items; stay linked to your district”

“1) Hire experienced staff 2) Try to become an expert in one or two fields and find someone you trust in other fields. Become their go to person and they become yours on those issues. 3) Keep an open mind and accept all in office appointments....Lobbyists and their clients are the experts in their fields. Use them as a source of information and weigh it accordingly. ”

“Get involved with your local community in some way.... Either elected or volunteering. This is very important to do before running for a state office.”

“Beware of the loud minority in your district. Those that agree with your actions don't contact you.”

“1. Select staff with experience, the more, the better. 2. Study the process of committees, also House and Senate. 3. Return phone calls the same day - all of them. 4. Answer emails within 24 hours - all of them. 5. DON'T BURN BRIDGES. 6. Legislation you are going to introduce and you think it's wonderful? Probably been introduced many times in the past.”

“1. Develop Relationships. 2. Get Mentors. 3. Learn issues. 4. Concentrate on 1 or 2 areas.”

“Work to develop expertise in areas that affect one's constituents and develop relationships with others you can depend on getting “honest” information to make decisions in support for legislation and the budget.”

“Knock on doors, knock on doors, knock on doors!! Know your district, and what is important to the people you represent. Be ready to stand up and fight for what you believe. Be honest.”

“Listen always, admit you don't know the answers, follow through/be thorough, call people - on the phone. Talk to them. Stay connected to the district by being visible and communicating with them.”



Conclusion

Former Michigan legislators who have voluntarily left office or been term-limited out have a lot to say about their experiences in Lansing. Regardless of their party affiliation or gender, they overwhelmingly support reforming or abolishing Michigan's legislative term limits. They would first reform the limits by extending the overall amount of time allowed in office, most likely to 12 years, by adding flexibility to serve that overall limit in either or both houses in any combination, and by extending the terms of office themselves to reduce the amount of time campaigning for reelection.

Most of the former lawmakers would opt to serve in office again, if given the chance.

Notes

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Methodology

The survey was conducted from May 17, 2020 to February 21, 2021, via email invitation to 308 former legislators. Overall, 110 complete responses were obtained via online surveys, for a response rate of 35.7%. The findings in this report use unweighted data.

Among the respondents, 79% were male while 21% were female; 68% were Republican compared to 29% Democratic and 1% each Libertarian, Independent, and “Other.” By chamber, 66% served in the Michigan House of Representatives, 4% served in the state Senate, and 29% served in both, while 26% served with the majority party, 9% served with the minority party, and 65% were members of both the majority and minority parties during their time in the legislature.



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