Overturning Term Limits: The Legislature's Own Private Idaho?

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Let's not mince words, the Idaho Legislature, with Speaker Newcomb as head-thug, has launched a *coup d'etat* against the people. It must not stand.

—Paul Jacobs (2002), Senior Fellow,

U.S. Term Limits

In late January, 2002, the Idaho legislature did the unthinkable: It overturned a 1994 statutory initiative, Proposition Two, which mandated term limits for nearly all state and local elected officials. The GOP-dominated legislature's approval of House Bill 425 precipitated a showdown with the Republican governor, Dirk Kempthorne, who had voiced support for the electorate's 1994 decision to limit legislative terms. Citing the persistent popular support for term limits and affirming "the power vested in the people," Kempthorne (2002) stated in his veto message that he could not "in good conscience allow this act of direct democracy to be wiped off the books by the mere stroke of my pen." On February 1, 2002, however, just 24 hours after the governor's pronouncement, both the House and Senate overrode Kempthorne's veto with decisive supermajorities.

As a result of the legislature's brash action, Idaho became the first state to completely strike down citizen-imposed term limits though legislative action. Local and national groups advocating term limitations, in disbelief of the audacity of the legislature and concerned that several other state legislatures might follow Idaho's lead, were understandably livid. Stacie Rumenap (2002), the Executive Director of U.S. Term Limits—based in Washington, D.C. and

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the primary financial backer of the successful 1994 initiative²—lambasted the legislature's actions, calling them "unconscionable." At the local level, Don Morgan, the leader of Citizens for Term Limits in Idaho, cautioned, "It ain't over. The people of Idaho will have the last word" (Hoffman 2002b).

Ballot Initiatives and Legislative Constraint

So why, to quote from an *Idaho State Journal* editorial, did the legislature "thumb their noses at the popular vote" ("What are We to Think" 3 February, 2002). Was this landmark legislative reversal of a ballot initiative really about lawmakers arrogating power to themselves? Did the legislative supermajorities in both chambers reflect, as Rumenap (2002) put it, the selfish ambitions of the "paid political class in Boise . . . bent on keeping their own power"? Or was there a parallel logic at play in the reversal of term limits in Idaho?

The legislature's controversial and apparently self-serving coup d'etat confounds the conventional wisdom that lawmakers—despite their obvious selfinterest to stay in office (Mayhew 1974)—will resist the urge to deter the implementation of highly visible and popular ballot measures. Even scholars largely critical of the initiative concede that the plebiscitary process may foster legislative responsibility and responsiveness. Legislators, it is commonly thought, are "politically unlikely" to tamper with successful initiatives (Magleby 1984, 186). Gerber, et al. (2001, 58-59) reason in their study of the implementation of a variety of initiatives in California that, "although most legislators were strongly opposed to term limits, the threat of severe sanctions forced them to comply." Given the persistent and strong public support in Idaho for term limitations, this logic of compliance would seem especially applicable in this case.3

Most state legislators, in Idaho as in other states, are not fans of "un-American . . . ballot access limitations," as House Speaker Bruce Newcomb, the chief sponsor of the bill, referred to

term limits during the legislative debate (Fick 2002). Leaving aside the important question of who benefits from term limits (Moncrief and Thompson 2001; Cain and Levin 1999; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000), it is important to consider an array of possible micro-level determinants for the anti-term limits legislative vote in Idaho. Beside obvious self-interest, are there other explanations why 76 of 104 legislators decided to overturn the 1994 popular vote?⁴

Expectations of a Legislator's Vote to Overturn the 1994 Term Limits Initiative

Modeling legislator support for House Bill 425 allows us to test several alternative hypotheses which may help to explain why a majority of legislators in Idaho voted to scrap the 1994 term limits ballot measure. First, there was considerable talk in Boise leading up to the veto override that legislators from safe districts would be more likely to support House Bill 425 than legislators from competitive districts. Legislators representing competitive districts surely realized that voting against the statewide electorate might prove counterproductive to their reelection bids. Even relatively safe incumbents, such as Representative Mike Moyle, a second-term Republican, admitted they expected to be challenged in either the primary or general elections in 2002 due to their support of the bill (Warbis 2002). But nearly half of Idaho's legislative seats went uncontested in 2000; many legislators were apparently unconcerned about facing future electoral competition.⁵ As such, legislators facing no opposition in the primary and general elections in 2000 are expected to support House Bill 425.

Second, there was speculation well before the override vote that several well-entrenched members were behind the legislative power grab. Nine-term member of the House, Republican Doug Jones, defended his vote against term limits, saying, "We have to look at the total system, what's right for the state of Idaho. If people don't like the way I vote, they should get rid of me"

(Hoffman 2002a). Indeed, long-serving legislators might be more inclined than junior members to vote for the antiterm limits bill as they become subject to term limitations sooner than their colleagues. Legislators with more seniority are expected to support the veto override.

Third, the palaver over term limits in Idaho had a strong partisan flavor. Reversing its initial support for term limits in 1994, the Republican leadership solidly backed the counter-majoritarian bill, in large part to insure the party's continued dominance of the legislature. Working behind closed doors, Republican party leaders were able to convince many of its members of the merits of overturning the ban ("GOP uses secret means" 2002). Not surprisingly, state Democratic party leaders viewed the GOP's desire to overturn the popular vote as a golden opportunity to score political points; party officials quickly announced they planned to use the veto override as a campaign issue against Republican incumbents in the 2002 election (Popkey 2002b). All else being equal, however, Republican legislators are expected to toe the party line and support the revocation of term limits.⁶

Fourth, since state policy preferences are geographically heterogeneous (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995), it may be rational for some legislators to vote in favor of a counter-majoritarian bill if citizens in their districts voted counter to the statewide electorate (Smith 2001). An initiative may win a statewide majority, but lose in a member's legislative district, or vice-versa; hence, it is unlikely that a legislator will rely on statewide election returns to inform his or her vote on pending legislation. As Republican Representative Horrace "Hod" Pomeroy of Boise, one of the handful of Republicans who opposed House Bill 425, commented, "I just can't in good conscience defy my constituents" (Popkey 2002b).8 Legislators representing districts that did not show great support for the 1994 initiative are expected to support revoking term limits. While the expectation is that a legislator's support for overturning term limits will reflect the 1994 popular vote of his or her legislative district, this effect may be mitigated somewhat by the fact that the popular vote occurred nearly eight years earlier.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is good reason to believe that legislators representing (sub)urban and rural districts may view the impact of term limits differently. According to several accounts, Republican party officials in

2000 began to call for a repeal of the 1994 initiative, "saying that local officials were never supposed to be the target and that term limits were depriving communities of experienced politicians, especially in sparsely populated rural areas that struggle to fill local offices" (Fick 2002). Indeed, prior to the legislative reversal, an estimated 60% of local officials were scheduled to be term-limited out of office in 2002, including 30 sheriffs, 44 county commissioners, 29 county clerks, 24 county treasurers, 34

coroners, and 27 assessors ("Lawmakers Can't Solve Mess" December 19, 2001). Local officials and their supporters (including the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry) lobbied legislators (especially rural ones) to overturn the ban on terms. As freshman Republican legislator Eulalie Langford stated, "This is not a vote about term limits. It's a vote about rural Idaho" (2002a). It is expected, then, that legislators representing rural districts will strongly support the repeal of term limits.

Table 1
Determinants of a Legislator's Vote to Override the Veto of House Bill 425, Repealing Term Limits

Independent Variables	Vote to Override of House Bill 425
Constant	-3.056 (3.070)
Percent District Vote on 1994	.077 (4.766)
Term Limits Initiative	
Competitiveness of 2000 Elections	.104 (.741)
Number of Terms	.097 (.121)
Political Party	2.931 (.838)
District Type	1.346 (.637)
Log Likelihood	96.300
Overall Model X ²	24.859
PRE (lambda-p)	.571
Correctly Predicted	97.4%
Number of Cases	104

Note: Coefficients are unstandardized and the asymptotic standard errors of the maximum likelihood estimates (MLE) are in parentheses. **Bold** signifies statistical significance at the .10 level.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is dichotomous, scored 1 if the legislator voted "yes" to override the governor's veto of House Bill 425, and scored 0 if the legislator voted "no" on the counter-majoritarian bill.

Descriptions of Independent Variables and Data Sources

Percent District Vote on 1994 Term Limits Initiative: percent "yes" vote in the member's legislative district for Proposition Two, the 1994 term limits ballot initiative. Unfortunately, although the Idaho Secretary of State compiles precinct level for votes on both ballot initiatives and legislative candidates, it does not disaggregate absentee ballots at the precinct level. The percent vote for the ballot measures in a member's district is thus estimated. If a member's district lies completely within a county, the county vote on the ballot measure is used to approximate the vote within his or her legislative district. If a member's district includes more than one county, the average of the county votes on the ballot measure is used to approximate the vote within his or her legislative district. (Source: Idaho Secretary of State 2002b).

Competitiveness of 2000 Elections: dummy variable scored 1 if the member ran unopposed or won both elections with more than 55% of the vote in 2000, and scored 0 if the member won 55% or less of the vote in either the primary or general election in 2000. The nine members who were appointed after the 2000 election are scored as running unopposed. (Source: Idaho Secretary of State 2002b).

Number of Terms: number of two-year terms served by the member. (Source: Hoffman 2002b).

Political Party: dummy variable scored 1 if the legislative member is a registered Republican, and scored 0 if he or she is a registered Democrat. (Source: Idaho Secretary of State 2002b).

District Type: dummy variable scored 1 if the member's district is rural, and scored 0 if the member's district is urban or suburban (Barone, et al. 1998).

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Estimations of Empirical Model

I use a logistic regression to estimate the impact of these five factors-the impact of the percentage of vote for the 1994 ballot initiative in a member's own district, the political party affiliation and number of terms in office of each legislator, the electoral competitiveness of the member's district, and the spatial-demographic nature of the member's district ((sub)urban or rural)—had on the probability an individual legislator supported overriding the governor's veto of House Bill 425. The dichotomous dependent variable is coded zero if the member voted "no" on the counter-majoritarian bill, one if he or she voted "yes" to overturn term

Table 1 displays the findings of the multivariate model. As expected, the results suggest that Republican legislators and members representing rural districts were significantly more likely to support House Bill 425 than Democrats and those representing urban and suburban districts. However, contrary to expectations, members with lengthier tenures in office and those with safe seats were not any more likely to support the veto override than members with less seniority or those winning competitive elections. Also confounding expectations, members representing districts that had less popular support for the 1994 term limit initiative were statistically no more likely to vote to overturn House Bill 425 than those representing districts with high popular support for term limits.¹⁰

To aid in the interpretation of these findings, I have converted the logistic regression coefficients as reported in Table 1 into expected values (probabilities) of legislative support for the veto override. In Table 2, I estimate the likelihood of Republican and Democratic



Home Free? Without term limits elected officials might never leave the Boise capital. Photo: istockphoto.com/Kyle Kirchhoff.

legislators voting to overturn the 1994 initiative under several specifications. A clear pattern is evident in Table 2: the (sub)urban/rural division among both Republicans and Democrats was much more apparent in the anti-term limits vote than whether or not a member faced serious opposition in the 2000 elections. For example, Republican legislators representing urban districts, regardless of whether they faced serious or no competition in the 2000 primary or general elections, were significantly less likely (57.3% and 59.8%, respectively) to support overturning the term limits ban than Republican members representing rural districts who faced either stiff (83.8%) or no opposition (85.1%) in 2000. Similarly, Democratic legislators, irrespective of the closeness

of their 2000 elections, representing rural districts were significantly more likely to support the override of the governor's veto.

To observers who follow Idaho politics closely, the significant results reported here—that Republican legislators and those representing rural districts were likely to vote for the countermajoritarian bill-should not come as a huge surprise. The state GOP, which had adopted a plank in its party platform calling for the repeal of term limits, put strong pressure on its legislative members to support reversing the term limits ban. But Republican support for the veto override was not universal. Legislative opposition to term limitations clearly emanated from Idaho's hinterland. The intense lobbying from local officials, their minions, and their business allies perhaps swayed rural members otherwise reluctant to overturn the will of the people. It seems plausible that rural legislators were especially influenced by reports that the parties were having difficultly recruiting qualified candidates to replace the more than 150 local officials in many of Idaho's 44 counties who were restricted from running for reelection in 2002.

Table 2 Expected Probability of Legislative Support for Veto Override of House Bill 425

District Type and	Party	
Competitiveness of 2000 Election	Republican	Democratic
Urban & Competitive	57.3%	6.7%
Urban & Safe	59.8%	7.4%
Rural & Competitive	83.8%	21.6%
Rural & Safe	85.1%	23.4%

Note: Estimates computed by setting two independent variables (Number of Terms and Percent District Vote on 1994 Term Limits Initiative) to their mean values and adjusting three dummy independent variables (Political Party, District Type, and Competitiveness of 2000 Election) accordingly, to scores of either 0 or 1. N = 104 (92 Republican members and 12 Democratic members).

Conclusion and Postscript

Certainly one needs not be a cynic to read the repeal of term limits in Idaho as a self-serving, last ditch effort by legislators to stay in office and retain power. (It bears noting, though, that term limits for state legislators were not to go into effect until the 2004 election.) An element of self-preservation certainly drives much legislative action on governance issues. During the months leading up to the veto override, however, it became evident that local elected officials were equally concerned about the consequences of the 1994 initiative. Local officials—from county clerks to sheriffs to tax assessors to mayors—along with their powerful lobbying associations, applied tremendous pressure on the legislature to gut the statutory term limits measure. The argument advanced by local officials and their supporters was not solely that of self-preservation, but that of functional need. With a sweeping overhaul of local officeholders on the horizon, a supermajority of lawmakers, led by those representing rural areas, agreed, deeming the 1994 term limits measure too draconian.

The political repercussions from the Idaho legislature's February decision to overturn term limits were immediate but not nearly as monumental as the advocates of limited terms had hoped. In late May 2002, 10 House and Senate members were defeated in their primary elections (Popkey 2002c). Redistricting and unpopular budget cuts for public education, though, may have contributed to the defeat of the incumbents as much as any opposition to term limits (Ahrens 2002). More ominously, term limits backers in early May had collected the

requisite 43,685 valid signatures to place a statewide popular referendum on the November 2002 ballot (Hoffman 2002d). The popular referendum asked voters if the legislature's repeal of the 1994 term limits initiative should be upheld. Local backers of the popular referendum brimmed with confidence that Idaho citizens would once again demonstrate their commitment to term limitations and "Repeal the Repeal," as they dubbed their campaign. 11

On November 5, however, term limit advocates were dealt a major blow. While seven more incumbent legislators were defeated at the polls, Proposition Two was narrowly approved by Idahoans with 50.2% of the vote. 12 The popular referendum ballot outcome sustained HB 425, thereby reaffirming the legislature's elimination of term limits for all state and most local elected officials in Idaho. The closeness of the popular vote on Proposition Two led proponents of the measure to claim that voters were confused due to the inverted "yes-means-no" wording of the popular referendum (Hoffman 2002c).¹³ Yet, the statewide vote revealed that there was widespread geographical support for the legislature's decision to abolish term limits. A majority of voters living in 35 of Idaho's 44 counties approved the popular referendum. More significantly, a majority of voters in only four of the state's 19 counties with less than 20,000 residents cast ballots against the referendum to endorse the

re-imposition of term limits. The logic advanced by legislators and local officials that term limits would harm rural jurisdictions evidently convinced a slim, but geographically dispersed, majority of Idahoans to sustain the legislature's bold reversal of term limits.

Legislators in the other 18 states with term limits on the books continue to watch the political fallout in Idaho. Local activists in Idaho have already announced plans to place another statewide term limit initiative on the statewide ballot in 2004. Their effort likely will receive financial support once again from national term limitation interest groups that want to see power-hungry Idaho legislators ousted from office. But what many advocates fail to comprehend is that the brouhaha over term limits in Idaho is as much a reflection of the socio-demographic and spatial divisions existing in Idaho as it is of elected officials refusing to accede to the popular will. In Idaho, as in other states, the "metropolitan-outstate cleavage" identified by Key (1956, 227-37) still plays a major role in defining state politics, as "[t]he strand of rural and small-town politics contributes special color and tone to the American political system." Political observers should continue to heed the historic urban-rural split in state legislatures, especially as rural areas continue to have their political clout diminished by term limits, reapportionment, and other governance issues.

Notes

1. The 1994 statutory initiative limited most elected state and local officials to eight years in office over any 15-year period. It limited county commissioners and school board members to six years of service over any 11-year period. The initiative did not cover special district elected officials.

2. U.S. Term Limits contributed 70% (\$33,275 of \$47,542) of the total monetary contributions greater than \$50 made to Idahoans for Term Limits in support of the 1994 initiative campaign (Idaho Secretary of State 2002a). Proponents spent a total of \$942,000 on four term limitation initiatives on the ballot in 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000 (Hahn 2002).

3. In the 1994 general election, Proposition two won 59.9% of the vote, thereby imposing term limits on elected federal, state, county, municipal, and school district officials. The measure passed in 36 of Idaho's 44 counties. The term limit ban on members of Congress was subsequently struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1995. In 1996, 56.1% of voters supported an initiative instructing candidates for U.S. Congress and the state legislature to support congressional term limits and indicating non-support on the ballot. In 1998, 54.7% of voters approved an initiative calling on congressional congressional term limits and indicating non-support on the ballot. In 1998, 54.7% of voters approved an initiative calling on congressional term limits and indicating non-support on the ballot.

sional candidates to sign term limit pledges and informing voters on the ballot if a candidate breaks such a pledge. Voters that year also affirmed with 53.2% of the vote an advisory referendum placed on the ballot by the legislature asking voters if they supported the 1994 term limit ban (Idaho Secretary of State 2002b, 2002c). Finally, in the summer of 2001 a group of local officials successfully challenged the constitutionality of the 1994 initiative in the state's 6th District court. In December 2001, however, the Idaho Supreme Court rejected the lower court's decision, ruling unanimously that the 1994 term limits measure was indeed constitutional.

- 4. One legislator, Republican Senator Cecil Ingram, was absent from the vote.
- 5. Representative Moyle, for example, was unchallenged in the GOP primary and won 69% of the vote in the 2000 general election. Overall, 69.5% (73 of the 105 legislators) faced no primary opponent in 2000 with 47.6% (50 of the 105 legislators) having no opponent in the general election. According to Boise State University political scientist Gary Moncrief (2002), who provided expert testimony on House Bill 425, a few legislators "voted against the repeal because they feared a serious chal-

lenge" (in either the primary or the general). See also Popkey (2002a).

- 6. Partisanship was a major factor in a counter-majoritarian bill in Colorado in 1999 when both legislative chambers voted to repeal a popular 1996 statutory initiative regulating campaign finance. The bill ultimately failed to become law when the House and Senate failed to reconcile slight differences in language (Smith 2001).
- 7. While there is a growing body of evidence that public policies adhere closer to citizen preferences in initiative states than in noninitiative states (Matsusaka 1995, 2001; Gerber 1996; Donovan and Bowler 1998; but see Lascher, Hagen, and Rochlin 1996; Camobreco 1998; Hagen, Lascher, and Camobreco 2001), there is also good reason to expect that individual state legislators will not always abide by the electorate's statewide vote on a ballot measure. Irrespective of whether public policy in states permitting the initiative is more consistent with the median voter than in non-initiative states, individual legislators interpret initiative results from a rational, selfish perspective. A recent analysis of several counter-majoritarian bills in Colorado-legislation that directly challenged the majority vote on previous statewide

ballot initiatives—reveals how legislators who supported controversial anti-abortion and antigay bills were more likely to have constituents who previously voted against the statewide majority on the related ballot measures (Smith 2001). With respect to these moralistic issues, legislators were not constrained by the statewide popular votes; rather, they looked to the district level popular vote of their own constituents to inform their votes on the countermajoritarian bills. From the individual legislator's perspective, then, it may at times be rational to vote counter to the statewide majority, especially if the counter-majoritarian legislative vote conforms to the preferences of his or her own district.

- 8. Representative Pomeroy's Legislative District 16A lies wholly within Ada county; the 1994 term limits initiative passed with 61.5% of the vote in Ada county.
- 9. In a separate model (not shown), there were no significant differences in the results when the nine members who were appointed after the 2000 elections were dropped from the analysis.
- 10. The indifference or insensitivity shown by legislators towards the preferences held by their constituents is indeed surprising. It is possible, of course, that legislators who voted against term limits perceived that most of the support in the district for term limits came from those residents who supported the other party. However, in a separate model (not shown) that includes the interaction of Political Party and Percent District Vote on 1994 Term Limits Initiative, the interaction variable is not significant.
- 11. Citing expediency, supporters of the popular referendum collected nearly half of their verified signatures in urban Ada County; less than 1% of their signatures came from 32 of Idaho's 44 counties ("Petition Signatures by County" 2002). Proponents of the popular referendum also depended heavily on the financial support of U.S. Term Limits to qualify the measure for the November ballot. By election day, the three official committees backing Proposition two had raised over \$580,000, with U.S. Term Limits (based in Washington, D.C.) contributing nearly 90% of the total
- contributions to the three committees. Opponents of the popular referendum raised more than \$100,000, with the bulk of contributions coming from business interest groups (Idaho Secretary of State 2002d). Incidentally, a proposed 2002 statutory ballot initiative calling for term limits for state legislative and executive officials but exempting local officeholders did not qualify for the ballot (Idaho Secretary of State 2002e).
- 12. When a popular referendum receives a majority "yes" vote the legislation in question is approvingly retained by the voters. Hence, when a measure receives a majority of the vote, the proponents of the popular referendum to repeal the legislation actually lose.
- 13. During the campaign, Don Morgan, the chairman of Idaho Citizens for Term Limits claimed, "If you don't like what the Legislature did, you say 'no.' It's actually pretty straightforward' (Russell 2002). Immediately after the November election, with voters approving the legislature's reversal of term limit, however, Morgan changed his tune, saying that his side lost because voters were confused (Hoffman 2002c).

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