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Term limits is the wrong fight in battle for election reform

By Robert W. Laird

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Whether you love term limits or hate them, the contretemps surrounding [Mayor Bloomberg's](#) attempt to set them aside so he can serve a third term has created a baffling and embarrassing moment in the city's political history.

The sad part is that all of this could have been avoided if the people who sold the city on term limits back in the 1990s had gone about their goal - clearing the deadwood out of municipal government - in the right way, with true election reform.

What is baffling is that if you really believe in term limits but also want Bloomberg to remain in City Hall during these tough economic times, you have an irreconcilable dilemma. Those two positions cannot logically co-exist.

That is precisely the fix that [Ronald Lauder](#), the father of term limits, has found himself in. He wants to keep his baby, but he also wants to keep Bloomberg. So first he was with the mayor, then against him, and now he is in the awkward position of saying he'll accept the termination of the law only if he can serve as chairman of a [Charter Revision Commission](#) that will reinstate it.

This is a farce worthy of the [Marx Brothers](#). If term limits are right in principle, then they are always right and should never be suspended. We don't pick and choose with other laws, deciding to set them aside when someone we admire is involved, then reinvoking them for everyone else. The argument for doing such a dipsy-doodle with term limits is that this is a one-time incident necessitated by the fact that Bloomberg is a keeper. Never again, say the proponents.

But how do they know that? Suppose 12 years or 20 years or at some other time in the future there is another acclaimed mayor who is reaching the end of his or her second term. Will term limits be set aside yet again amid assurances that this time we really, really mean it and we won't ever do this again? That's addict talk.

It is easy to understand why so many people voted for term limits when they won overwhelming support back in the '90s. It was all about the widespread frustration with the quality of many of the city's elected officials.

The reason the deadheads kept getting reelected is because [New York](#) has what are undoubtedly the worst election laws in the nation. They were rigged by the political machines of a bygone era to keep party loyalists in place and make challenges by reformers nearly impossible.

The number of times candidates have been booted off the ballot because they ran afoul of the intricacies of these election laws is beyond counting. One of the most memorable came in 2000 when [John McCain](#) was running against [George W. Bush](#) in New York's Republican presidential primary.

The state's [GOP](#) establishment had decided to back Bush, so McCain's efforts to get his name on the ballot were challenged everywhere he went and he was locked out of 19 of the state's 31 congressional districts. When that fact came to light, embarrassed Republicans relented and allowed McCain to appear on ballots statewide. But the point is that party functionaries can thwart democracy whenever they want by exploding legal booby traps.

Getting rid of New York's awful election laws has been one of the longest-running and most unsuccessful reform efforts in the state's history. Small wonder, since the legislators in [Albany](#) who would have to liberalize the laws are among their beneficiaries. Burglars don't usually kick the ladder out once they're inside the house.

Nevertheless, if New Yorkers want to minimize the number of hacks in public office and maximize the qualified officeholders, election law reform is the way to go, not the bludgeon of term limits. And who knows? If billionaires like Bloomberg and Lauder who have been so open-handed with their spending in the past were to put some of their fortunes behind a campaign to make ballot access easy and affordable for all, it might even pass.

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