# Right for All the Wrong Reasons

by Susan Reefer
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Some servants of the public trust seem to be having a little trouble, well, letting go. Instead of making plans for farewell dinners, penning gracious speeches including phrases about passing of torches, or booking long-neglected vacation plans, 22 members of the City Council introduced a bill which would make term limits simply go away.

Millions of New York City voters approved term-limit referendums that limit all New York City elected officials to a maximum of two terms. Since the two-term limit first became effective eight years ago, that means the time is up for not only Mayor Giuliani, but most council members, many of whom have held their seats for many, many more than two terms.

It is not a simple thing, to overturn a ballot initiative, particularly one that passed twice, in 1993 and again in 1996. And then there is the question of time. To be meaningful (at least in the eyes of the City Council members), the new bill would have to allow current officeholders to run for re-election this year, creating a seamless transition

But apparently it is entirely legal and proper, statutorily speaking. The City Council has the legislative authority to pass a law which would put an end to term limits before they began.

Politically speaking, it is entirely another matter. Voters don't usually appreciate it when elected officials ignore their wishes. Then-House Speaker Tom Foley (D-Washington) found that out in 1994. He attempted to overturn his home state's term limit laws to his peril. He became the first sitting U.S. House of Representative Speaker to lose re-election in 100 years, and provided a chilling morality tale to others who might be reluctant to relinquish power.

Term limits are often heralded as a means of voting reform. And certainly, term limits will ensure that elected officials look different by this time next year. But term limits are something of a cop-out. They allow voters to rest assured that things won't get too far out of line without having to pay too much attention to the process.

The absence of term limits doesn't mean you can't get rid of a long-time incumbent. He or she can still be voted out of office the old-fashioned way. The presence of term limits does ensure that popular, well-respected, deserving officials can't be voted back into office, no matter how

the voters feel. This is often felt the most in communities with little or no political clout. These communities rely on representatives building up seniority in order to be an effective advocate.

There is the additional matter of institutional knowledge within the City Council. This would be a fond memory once no City Council member had been in office for more than two years. And it could happen as soon as 2003, when the members who are not forced out this time around would be compelled to leave the City Council.

The term-limits question, then, goes beyond simply the legislative clout of the City Council versus the will of the voters. However questionable the timing or the motives of the City Council members, they may in fact be promoting a far more democratic alternative in seeking to abolish term limits.

The City Council may find itself in the unusual and unenviable position of being right for all the wrong reasons.

## Term Limits ARE Foolish; Campaign Finance Is Wise

By Katie Allison

This is one issue in which we largely agree. Term limits are a foolish tool that will make our governments run less effectively. But more foolish, and possibly harmful, is to try to overturn the wishes of the voters.

The American public has expressed continuing dissatisfaction with its elected officials. They don't think their congressmen get anything done. Their city officials are corrupt, partisan, lazy. The country's elected officials have gotten comfortable with their power.

There is a natural solution. The best term limit a citizen has is their vote. If the voters don't want someone in office, they can vote for his or her opponent. They can vote to get the 'old

bum' out of office. Seems easy enough. But lately it's not the politicians who are lazy; it's the people. Voter turnout is abysmally low. And since the voters have become too lazy to do their civic duty, they want to change the rules. If they don't act, if they sit around, it will still be taken care of for them. Term limits will insure that no one a voter dislikes will be around too long. (The officials a voter likes won't be around long either, but hey, nothing's perfect).

Do we distrust ourselves as voters so much that we can't decide who should and shouldn't be in office anymore?

This year 35 City Council seats are going to be vacated and numerous city officials will either be forced to leave office or run for a different position because of term limits. When the voters of New York City voted for this in 1993 and 1996, did they really want entirely new groups of officials to come into office at once? With most of these new officials not knowing exactly how the system works, not knowing how a bill is passed, getting lost inside City Hall? And by the time the newly elected have gotten it figured out, by the time they understand how to get things accomplished for their community, they're out on the street.

Twice the voters of New York have asked for term limits, and they should get what they asked for. The members of the City Council who are asking to overturn the law, whether for upstanding civic or sad selfish reasons, are in the wrong here (and frankly, are embarrassing themselves). This law should be overturned -- not by the people who face unemployment, but by the voters. Those of us who oppose term limits need to do a better job of explaining the pitfalls of the limits. Possibly the most effective message to those voters will be the chaos that city government will experience next year with so many new elected officials.

The country's campaign finance system remains one reason why many eligible voters express disappointment with our political system. Which brings me to someone else who is embarrassing himself -- Rudy (he's good at this). His "Capital of the World" also happens to be a leader in campaign finance reform. People across the nation are talking about this issue, and New York City has actually done something about it.

Corporate contributions have been banned, and with the 4-1 campaign finance match that the city provides, candidates can spend less time on bended knee pleading with rich donors and more time talking to real voters about what they might do to improve our city. Rudy himself complained in 1999 about making fundraising calls: "I just don't like it. I don't like doing it. It's part of the stuff that's wrong with American politics right now."

A veteran of a few campaigns himself, the mayor must know that ending this match right now in the middle of the campaign cycle will only reek havoc on those running. Is he annoyed that, since at this point there is no major GOP candidate in the mayoral race, a lot of the money is going to Democrats?

Is he frustrated that since he is term limited he's not going to get to use any of the money (at least not this time around)? As the New York Public Interest Group noted, "no individual has received more public matching funds in city history than Rudolph Giuliani--$4.1 million in three election bids."

Or is this just the latest in his continuing feud with campaign finance in general, ever since his fine from the Campaign Finance Board for violations in 1997?

What would your old buddy Senator McCain think, Mr. Mayor?

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