

City Council Approves Term Limits Extension

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In its most divisive vote in recent memory, the City Council approved an extension of term limits clearing the way for two-thirds of its members, four borough presidents, the comptroller, public advocate and Mayor Michael Bloomberg to run for a third term.

Thursday afternoon's vote [reverses](#) two referenda approved in the 1990s, but, supporters argue, is a necessary response to the fiscal crisis gripping the city and the nation. The decision also drastically changes the circumstances of next year's city elections, which would have seen a large turnover in City Hall.

(For a discussion of what the vote and the extension of term limits could mean for City Council, see Gotham Gazette's [For Council, Another Term Holds Risks and Rewards.](#))

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[The bill \(\[Intro 845\]\(#\) \)](#) was approved by a vote of 29 to 22.

Some of the bill's fiercest opponents, including council members Letitia James and Bill de Blasio, have [pledged](#) to fight the term limits extension in [court](#) . A suit, which names the entire City Council and the mayor as defendants, was [filed](#) in Manhattan federal court less than two hours after the council adjourned its meeting.

For three weeks, City Hall has been [consumed](#) by the term-limits debate -- a discussion that has centered more on democratic principles and process than whether or not city officials should be allowed to serve eight or 12 years.

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Before the council voted Thursday afternoon, Council Speaker Christine Quinn made an approximately five-minute appeal for her members to support the mayor's bill -- introduced only two weeks ago. "My colleagues," she said, "I come to the floor on this day with mixed emotions, because this is a difficult vote, but this is a difficult vote in difficult times." She continued: "In times like these, voters should have the choice."

Prior to the approval of the mayor's proposal, the council defeated an [amendment](#) that would have required the voters to approve any term limits extension before the legislation could take effect. It was defeated by a vote of 28 to 22 with one abstention. Two members who spearheaded and voted for the amendment -- David Yassky and Alan Gerson -- reversed their position and voted for the mayor's bill after.

For a full breakdown of who voted how, click [here](#) .

Rush to Judgement?

Three weeks ago, Bloomberg, portraying himself as the person best able to lead the city in tough economic times, [said](#) voters needed to have the opportunity to return him to office for another term -- regardless of term limits. He alleged, though many disagreed, that there was not enough time to put the issue to the voters before the 2009 campaign. He wanted the City Council to extend the limit.

Following his announcement, opponents of an extension criticized the council and the mayor for speeding through the legislation and not taking the time to hold hearings in every borough. Last week, the council held two days -- encompassing 20 hours -- of hearings at City Hall.

Some opponents also [attacked](#) an [agreement](#) between the mayor and Ronald Lauder, the billionaire who spearheaded the campaign to establish term limits in the city. Under the deal, Lauder would support an extension of term limits for now and the mayor would establish a charter review commission in 2010, after the mayoral election, to look into term limits -- and name Lauder to it. That commission could potentially send the issue back to the voters then.

The Council's Debate

Those who voted in favor of the mayor's bill hinged their support for a term limits extension

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enacted through legislation -- without voter approval -- on the economic turbulence shaking Wall Street and on the concept that term limits are "anti-democratic." They argued the city needs stability, and allowing Bloomberg and others a chance at a third term merely provides constituents with another choice. An extension, they say, does not guarantee reelection.

"Today, the majority of the City Council decided to give the people of New York a fuller choice in the November 2009 election," read a statement from Bloomberg after the council vote. "I believe that was the right choice, and I want to thank Speaker Quinn for her leadership. Those of us who work on both sides of City Hall must now move forward with the important decisions that face us, particularly finding ways to soften the fallout from the economic downturn and balancing our budget as revenues decline."

Opponents, though, said acting against the will of the voters from the council floor is a run around democracy. Pointing to the chamber's ceiling where quotes from Abraham Lincoln's [Gettysburg Address](#) are etched in an elaborate fresco, Councilmember Vincent Ignizio said, "Bring the people in, open up the doors to government and truly be the reformers that is this body. ... If you make that compelling case to your constituents they will reward you. Do not reward yourselves."

Thursday's vote was not [without passion](#), politics and posturing. The chamber was packed with constituents, some of whom stood for two hours holding signs above their heads with pleas for or against an extension. Members recited quotes from presidents, newspaper editorials and the mayor himself. They gave two-minute monologues, the majority of which were against the mayor's proposal.

"A voter referendum -- approximately \$15 million," said Councilmember Rosie Mendez. "A legislative vote -- several hours at a New York City Council hearing. Democracy," she said, then paused. "Priceless. Do not put a price on democracy."

Along with passion, came humor.

"Unfortunately here," quipped Councilmember Gale Brewer during the council's roll call at the start of the meeting. The chamber erupted with laughter.

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Others spewed disappointment and anger. At the meeting's close, jeers from the chamber's balcony called the speaker a sellout, saying the council should be ashamed of itself. Both members of the public and the legislative body said this would not be the end of the term-limits debate.

"The mayor is the big loser," said Councilmember Charles Barron, following the vote. "He lost democracy. He lost the people."

Three Weeks in October

Gotham Gazette's coverage of the term limits debate:

[For Council, Another Term Holds Risks and Rewards](#) : Would voting to extend term limits enhance the City Council's power -- or reinforce its image as a band of marionettes?

[Make That Three: Bloomberg's Reelection Bid](#) : If Bloomberg manages to win re-election, what could he do about the economy anyway?

[Comparing Proposals on Term Limits](#) : A guide to the competing measures proposed in City Council.

[Term Limits as a Voting Rights Issue](#) : Where civil rights and civil liberties organizations stand.

[Third Term's The Charm](#) : The debate takes shape. How the mayor and the City Council could change the term limits law.

[Musical Chairs: Shuffling Seats in City Government](#) : The situation before the mayor and City Council changed their minds.

For commentary and breaking news on term limits, see our blog, [The Wonkster](#) . For links to reporting on the issue from other New York press, see [City Hall Links in the News](#)

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