
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

And then they'll say we ratified their scheme

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | NYC, Politics

October 26, 2010 — The sordid tale of how New York City's Mayor, City Council Speaker, and a majority of City Council members overrode the twice-expressed decision of City voters that their officials should be limited to two terms is fairly well known, at least in New York. Now, New York City voters have been presented with a ballot proposition structured to avoid giving them the opportunity to reimpose that term limit regime across the board. And those same breathtakingly self-serving officials will, I suspect, try to twist either a "yes" vote or a "no" vote into an argument that voters have somehow ratified the officials' 2008 power grab.

In 1993, New York City voters approved — by an overwhelming margin — a ballot proposition to prohibit anyone from serving as Mayor, Public Advocate, Comptroller, Borough President, or City Council member for more than two consecutive full terms. In 1996, City voters turned back an effort to relax that limit to three terms.

Fast forward to 2008. Michael Bloomberg, the City's Mayor, [had long supported the term limits provision of the City Charter, and had even called attempts to loosen term limits "disgusting."](#) But the Mayor, who

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was slated to be term-limited out of office, and Christine Quinn, the Speaker of the City Council, apparently decided that they were indispensable to the City's well-being. (Many City Council members managed to convince themselves that they, too, were indispensable.) How can we permit our constituents to face the catastrophe of being bereft of our services!

The argument commonly put forth was that the exigencies of the financial crisis made incumbent retention especially invaluable. Looking back on the arguments later made over banks said to be "too big to fail," perhaps these officials should have referred to themselves as "too entrenched to fail."

Commentator guarantee: I know how preposterous it sounds, but these guys actually peddled the line that they really were indispensable. And not only that, the assertions were treated seriously; indeed, in the case of the Mayor, almost like gospel.

As [Jason L. Riley wrote in the opinion pages of The Wall Street Journal](#) at the time:

Obviously the mayor believes that he's indispensable to Gotham's well-being, which will come as no surprise to any journalist who's met with him. What's passing strange is that so much of the local press seems to share the mayor's inflated view of himself.

But the Mayor and the Speaker didn't do anything so risky as asking voters to decide, yet again, whether they really meant it the first two times they said "two terms only." Instead, the Mayor and Speaker trumped the voters by amending the City Charter legislatively, in what turned out to be an unusually close City Council vote.

This year, the Mayor — whose narrow 2009 re-election margin was seen by many as a reflection of voter discontent with his and the Speaker's decision to change the term limits law without going back to the voters — belatedly tried to salve voters concerns (or at least appear to do so) by appointing a Charter Revision Commission. The Commission could have easily framed a ballot proposal that would have, except for officials currently serving a third term, immediately restored the two-term limit that had existed prior to 2008.

In the end, however, a divided Charter Revision Commission took a different route. In a measure to be decided on by voters next Tuesday, the Commission is only proposing that the two-term limit become fully effective after all officials currently in office have had the opportunity to be elected to and serve a third term. That is, voters can't say, "It's bad enough that some snuck in, we want to make sure that no one else does." They can only say, "Please restore things so that our views on term limits will be uniformly in effect for all officials beginning in 2021."

Despite [criticism of the Charter Revision Commission's actions](#) that, at least briefly, made term limits "once again the talk of New York's political world," it seems likely that the proposed revision to the Charter will be approved by voters.

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We won't know the outcome, of course, for another week. But there is something that we can safely predict. If voters reject the proposal, those apparently believing in the divine right of municipal officials to a third term will say: "See, voters really don't want us limited to three terms." If voters approve the proposals, they will describe the outcome as: "See, voters think that relaxing limits to permit three terms is a good idea." Heads the New Royalists win; tails we lose.

Will press coverage do anything more than uncritically convey the spin that term limit extenders choose to rationalize the ultimate outcome? As the Journal's Riley put it two years ago: "[T]here's something deeply disturbing about a local press corps that lets the political class get away with it."

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