The notion of “checks and balance” is a fundamental tenet of American democracy that assumes that each branch of our government has powers that allow it to limit—check—the power of the other two branches. This system is based on the assumption that power is balanced between the three branches of government, and this balance prevents one branch from dominating policymaking. In part because of its highly professionalized legislature, Michigan’s government closely resembles the national system based on three co-equal branches of government. But under term limits, its highly professionalized legislature could be overshadowed by its professional bureaucracy headed by a strong governor.

The “Yes on B” campaign, which led to the passage of Michigan’s term limits law, promised Michigan voters a more independent legislature (State Archives of Michigan, 1992), seemingly reflecting a concern that this branch was falling under the sway of other factions active in Michigan government. Bureaucrats and lobbyists were two sources of outside influence that term limits advocates nationally claimed unduly influenced legislators (Niven, 2000).

Many observers of politics believe that legislatures nationally are losing power to the executive branch of government. Contrary to the claims of term limits advocates, term limits opponents worried that state legislatures would be weakened further by limiting the length of service. They feared that the steady stream of newcomers that inevitably accompany term limits would lack the experience needed to exercise the powers of
the legislature effectively. This would cede power to other branches of government, especially the executive branch, which includes both the governor and officials working in the state agencies. The Michigan Legislature, particularly the lower chamber, was designed to be the part of the government most responsive to the “popular will.” Therefore, weakening the legislature was seen by term limits’ opponents as a prescription to create an “imperial governor,” who could, aided by a phalanx of bureaucrats, dominate policymaking.

To explore changes in the balance of power between the Michigan House of Representatives and other actors, we rely on three questions that asked our interview respondents to give the House as a whole a letter grade (A to F with pluses and minuses permitted) on (1) its ability to work with the State Senate, (2) its ability to work with the Governor’s Office, and (3) monitoring the implementation of programs. The latter activity is part of a legislature’s responsibility to oversee the work of the executive branch of government—one of the checks and balances included in the Michigan Constitution. To explore whether the legislature was carrying out this duty as vigorously after term limits, we also asked legislators how much time they spent monitoring state agencies as one activity among the series of eleven activities we have discussed repeatedly throughout this book. Additionally, in the series of questions about the sources of information and guidance legislators relied on when confronted by a difficult issues considered in one of their committees, we asked about the extent to which they relied on Officials from State Agencies, the Governor’s Office, and State Senators. Finally, toward the end of our interviews we asked an open-ended question about the most important impacts of term limits. In response to that question, respondents frequently mentioned changes in the balance of power between the House and the other branches of government. We incorporate these responses into our discussion of outside influences on the House after term limits.

The veteran legislators termed out in 1998 sometimes speculated about the potential for relationships between major actors to change. Some of them noted that as term limits drew nearer they were seeing signs of things to come, but they were not present during the post–term limits sessions to explicitly make these comparisons. Although the post–term limits cohort includes some former staffers and other actors who would have known what the balance of power was before term limits, most of those elected for the first time in 1998 or after are less able to judge the changes in the relationships between the House and the various groups of actors. Therefore, when we analyzed the open-ended