Imagine at least two candidates either of whom might win a majority of the votes cast by actively involved citizens—a competitive election. In reality, candidates for state legislatures often run unopposed in primary elections that attract less than 20 percent of the voters. General elections attract more voters, but few are competitive with most candidates winning by a landslide. In this chapter we explore some of the reasons that state legislative electoral reality falls short of the competitive ideal, and we investigate whether term limits increase electoral competition.

Open seat elections generally attract more candidates, spark more interest, and bring more voters to the polls (Gaddie & Bullock, 2000). So by increasing the number of open seat elections, term limits proponents reasoned that they would increase electoral competition. This seems like a plausible assumption, yet we found little evidence that this happened. Even more surprising, when an incumbent runs for reelection term limits seem to suppress competition. So term limits appear to make elections even less competitive overall despite substantially increasing the number of open seat contests.

To explore the effects of term limits on electoral competition, we examined the lower chambers of the California and Michigan legislatures. Readers are reminded that voters in both states adopted extremely stringent lifetime limits on legislative service, with a maximum of six

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years in the lower chamber and eight years in the upper chamber. Given their short terms of service and their highly professionalized legislatures, the effects of term limits should be more powerful in California and in Michigan than in any other states with term limits. Hence, if term limits do not affect electoral competition in these two states, it is less likely that they will anywhere.

As we noted in the introduction, the Michigan House of Representatives and the California General Assembly share many characteristics, but also differ on some key variables that might affect electoral competition. One of these differences is partisan competition. Political parties are important brokers of political competition. The strength of the political parties can be measured by their ability to exert control over the candidates appearing on primary ballots. Using this metric California’s political parties are weak (Debow & Syer, 2000), and Michigan’s are strong (Palm & Smith, 1995). Third-party candidates are less common and less important in Michigan than they are in California, where third-party candidates occasionally win elections and sometimes make a difference in the outcome of the election.

Although the two major political parties are active in both states, in the last decade and a half, statewide partisan competition was more common in Michigan than in California. Both Michigan and California have had Republicans and Democrats in control of legislative chambers during the 1990s, and each has had governors from both political parties. From 1942 to 1992, nearly two-thirds of Michigan’s governors won with less than 55 percent of the vote. During the same time period, only 41.7 percent of California governor’s races were decided in similarly close contests (G. Scott Thomas, 1994, p. 314). Michigan was a battle ground state in the 2000 presidential election, while California was safely Democratic. Partisan control of Michigan’s State House of Representatives was closely contested and changed regularly in the pre-term limits years. The Democrats (and Willie Brown) maintained control of the California General Assembly in the years preceding term limits.

Although Michigan appears to have both stronger political parties and more partisan competition than California, Michigan’s parties have distinct geographic bases of power. So statewide partisan competition does not usually translate into partisan competition within individual State House districts. Base party voting strength is lopsided in almost all of Michigan’s races for the State House. Thus we would expect Michigan’s two parties to manage competition strategically to protect their most vulnerable candidates, and given the strength of the state’s parties, we would expect them to succeed.