CHAPTER 4

The New Breed of Term-Limited State Legislators

Many people, both those supportive of and opposed to term limits, assumed that once entrenched white, male incumbents—the good ol’ boys—were termed out of office, women and ethnic minority group members would win more elections (Bell, 1992). Additionally, some scholars (Petracca, 1996) believed that reducing the length of service would discourage middle-aged males from abandoning established careers to run for the state legislature. Thus, some opponents of term limits consoled themselves that at least term-limited state legislatures would become more diverse.

The number of women and ethnic minority group members elected to state legislatures increased steadily during the past decades. Yet, white men continue to dominate state legislatures, and women and ethnic minority group members are still underrepresented compared to their numbers in the population. Nationally, women held 23.5 percent of the State Assembly or State House seats in 2003, despite constituting more than 50 percent of the electorate. Although the 2000 census identifies 12 percent of the U.S. population as African American, only 8.2 percent of those serving in state legislatures in 2003 had African American ancestry.

When term limits removed the “drag of incumbency,” it seemed reasonable to assume that women would win more seats in state legislatures. Men and women have similar probabilities of winning open seat elections (Karnig & Walter, 1976; Burrell, 1988 and 1990; Bledsoe & Herring, 1990; Welch & Studlar, 1996) and in special elections, women tend to be more successful than men (Gaddie & Bullock, 2000). Yet,
because incumbency provides an edge at the ballot box and most incumbents are men, the advantages of incumbency impede women’s electoral gains.

Additionally, truncated legislative service imposed by term limits might undermine the career incentives thought to attract male candidates. In professionalized legislatures, such as Michigan’s House of Representatives and California’s General Assembly, with high salaries, staff, and year-round sessions, prior to term limits elected office often became a lifetime career.³ Ehrenhalt (1991) found that the prominence of women in the Colorado legislature (a part-time chamber with relatively low compensation) could be partially explained by the unattractiveness to men of a job requiring long hours with low compensation. Therefore, women might be more interested than men in running for office in term-limited state legislatures. As one woman serving in the Michigan House of Representatives quipped, men are looking for a career; women are looking for a job (interview notes, 1997–1998).

Most voters tend to be loyal to incumbents regardless of the incumbent’s ethnicity. In open seat elections, however, voters tend to support people of their own ethnicity (Herring & Forbes, 1994; Herrnson & Stokes, 2001). State electoral districts often concentrate ethnic group members into majority-minority districts (i.e., districts drawn so that more than 50 percent of its potential voters are members of an ethnic minority group). Yet prior to term limits, veteran “white” incumbents represented some of these majority-minority districts, in some cases for decades. Once these incumbents were termed out of office, many observers predicted that someone from the district’s dominant ethnic group would win election. The assumption was that term limits would increase electoral opportunities for ethnic minorities, but primarily in districts where the “pent up voting strength” of ethnic minority voters was thwarted by long-serving white incumbents (Caress et al., 2003).

Given that term limits preclude a long-term career in a legislative chamber, middle-aged candidates might be reluctant to leave careers for a short hiatus in public service. Polsby (1993) argues that term-limited legislative service would be attractive to older people at or near the end of their career. Alternatively, ambitious people in their twenties might view the contacts and name recognition garnered during a stint in public office to be a good launch pad for a future career, political or otherwise.

In short term limits were expected to change the age distribution in state legislatures, as well as changing the gender and ethnic composition of those bodies. In this chapter we explore the impact of term limits on the composition of the Michigan State House of Representatives and the