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Legislative Term Limits and Voter Turnout

Robynn Kuhlmann[1] and Daniel C. Lewis[2]

Abstract

According to reformers, legislative term limits should increase voter turnout by enhancing electoral competitiveness for legislative seats. However, this claim has been largely untested. The only existing study of the effect of legislative term limits on voter turnout, to date, finds that turnout in California did not increase after the imposition of term limits and may have decreased turnout. Yet, it is unclear whether this result generalizes to other states. This study employs a comparative state analysis of both aggregate turnout and district-level turnout rates in state legislative elections. We find that term limits significantly increase voting rates in state legislative elections.

Keywords

term limits, legislative politics, political participation, political behavior, elections, legislative elections, voting behavior

Since the early 1990s, 21 states have imposed term limits on state legislators. Although six states have repealed these laws, 15 states currently limit the tenure of their state representatives.[1] This movement was spearheaded by growing cynicism toward legislatures—a trend that began in the early 1980s and still exists today (see Patterson and Magleby 1992; Karp 1995). Populist movements that advocate limited tenure for state representatives cite multiple reasons for doing so. Term limits, they argue, will increase turnover and reform the culture of careerist politicians who have become increasingly dependent on interest groups.[2] Another argument is that the increased turnover associated with term limits should create more "civic-minded" citizen legislatures that more accurately reflect constituents (e.g., Fund 1990). In addition, populists contend that term limits should create more competitive elections. Purging incumbents out of legislatures

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should increase the number of open seats and reduce the number of uncontested elections. Uncontested seats are a common characteristic of state legislative elections (see Squire 2000), and inducing open seats should give more choice to citizens while increasing voter turnout due to electoral competitiveness.

This last argument is important because it connects term limits to vote choice and electoral competition, two critical concepts in democratic theory that give citizens control over accepting or rejecting potential or sitting representatives (see Riker 1988; also see Schumpeter [1942] 2008). At its most basic level, voter turnout is a measurement of the health of a democracy (Franklin 2004; Hill and Leighley 1992; Lijphart 1997; Piven and Cloward 1988; 2000; Teixeira 1992). Relatively low levels of voter turnout create a smaller electorate that is less likely to fairly represent all segments and interests in society. If that is the case, then institutions designed to accurately reflect the will of citizens may not function as intended under low voter turnout. As such, it is important to assess claims of institutional arrangements that have the potential to boost voter participation, including legislative term limits. Indeed, turning out to vote is one of the most powerful exercises of political input for citizens and acts as a safeguard of citizen interests (Pateman 1970). The vote also minimizes the amount of effort necessary for popular rule (Bachrach and Botwinick 1992). If term limits induce voter turnout and electoral competition, then it allows citizens to have a voice in shaping policy (Bachrach and Botwinick 1992). Thus, this study examines the question of how legislative term limits affect voter turnout in American state legislative elections.

While advocates certainly have made many claims about the benefits of term limits, scholars have only relatively recently had the opportunity to empirically assess these claims because these rules just began affecting state legislative elections in 1996. Since then, more than 1,000 state legislators have been forced out of office (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL] 2014). Scholars have certainly taken advantage of this institutionally induced turnover to assess a myriad of theories and test the claims of term limits advocates (Mooney 2009).

Term limits are described as a "boon" to a variety of theoretical examinations in legislative behavior and representation (Mooney 2009). Research on the impact of term limits covers changes in the demographic composition of state legislatures (Caress et al. 2003; Carey et al. 2006; Mondak 1995), overflow to up-the-ticket races (Berkman 1994; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 1998; Francis and Kenny 1997; Opheim 1994; Powell 2000), interest group influence and policy formation (Kousser 2005), the behavior of state legislators (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Carey et al. 2006; Chen and Niou 2005; Kousser 2005), and balance of power issues between governors and legislatures (Kousser 2005; Moncrief and Thompson 2001). These studies assess the real implications of populist feats. They also provide ample room to test the theoretical and practical implications of term limits in state legislatures.

Yet, questions about the effects of term limits on citizen electoral participation have garnered surprisingly little scholarly attention. Of the abundance of research on state legislative term limits, only one study has examined its effects on participation in elections. In contrast with populist claims that term limits would increase voter turnout, Nalder's (2007) study of California legislative elections presents evidence that term

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limits may actually reduce voting rates. Given the counterintuitive nature of those findings and the dearth of other studies on legislative term limits and voter turnout, it is not immediately clear whether this result holds in other term-limited states. California has the most professionalized state legislature in the United States, the most populous legislative districts, and is considered a national leader for policy innovation (see Boehmke and Skinner 2012). Do these unique features, among others, make it the exception or the rule? Without a broader, comparative analysis, it is difficult to assess the effects of legislative term limits on voter turnout. As such, we conduct an analysis of turnout in state legislative elections in all states that have adopted term limits from 1988 to 2010. Consistent with the claims of term limits advocates, we find that the imposition of term limits increases voter turnout in state legislative elections.

Term Limits and Voter Turnout

Expanding the choice of candidates at the polls is one of the arguments utilized to advocate for term limits for state legislators. Supporters of these reforms argue that term limits would increase the number of competitive elections through creating more open-seat elections. Open-seat elections create equal playing fields where "new blood" can have a chance to win elective office without having to run against entrenched incumbents (see Fund 1990). As a result, citizens should have more electoral choice and turn out to vote more often. Importantly, competitive electoral systems are a means for citizens to have the ability to drive policy and, as a result, the allocation of resources. Accordingly, institutional arrangements that expand vote choice and increase competition are also generally supported by democratic theorists because they rejuvenate citizen participation and interest in politics (see Franklin 2004; Hill and Leighley 1992; Piven and Cloward 1988; 2000; Riker 1988; Teixeira 1992).

Extant studies confirm the argument that term limits will increase the number of open seats (e.g., Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004; Nalder 2007). Open seats should have a positive influence on voter turnout because they tend to produce more competitive races because no candidate has the advantages of incumbency (e.g., Gaddie and Bullock 2000). Incumbents tend to have strong name recognition and can claim credit for legislation (Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974). In addition, incumbents can often ward off quality challengers through fundraising advantages and often only face inexperienced challengers (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Strategic politicians understand the incumbency advantage and often wait until there is an open seat to run for office (see Jacobson and Kernell 1983; also see Jacobson 1989), thus creating a competitive electoral environment. As such, open-seat races are likely to draw quality candidates and produce relatively more competitive elections, though levels of competition may remain low in states and districts that are dominated by one party.

Furthermore, competitive elections are found to increase voter participation in congressional and state legislative races (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; G. W. Cox and Munger 1989; also see Franklin 2004). According to Downs' (1957) rational choice model of the calculus of voting, if an individual perceives an election to be competitive, then the benefits of turning out to vote increase because the probability that one

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can influence the election also increases. Accordingly, voters experience a mobilizing political environment, filled with quality candidates that strategically run in the absence of any incumbency advantages (Francis and Kenny 1997; Powell 2000; but see Nalder 2007; Squire 2000). In addition, competitive elections stimulate media efforts by political parties, which also help to mobilize citizens to participate in politics (G. W. Cox and Munger 1989; Hill and Leighley 1992; Rosenstone and Hanson 2003). Thus, given the relationship between term limits and open-seat races, states with term limits should have higher levels of voter participation in legislative elections. This would not only be a boon to the populist argument, but a consideration for democratic theorists weighing the pros and cons of term-limited legislatures.

Yet, the existing literature on whether or not open seats produce competitive elections in *term-limited* states remains mixed. A variety of studies conducted on California conclude that term-limited seats are more competitive than incumbent-held seats (see Daniel and Lott 1997; also see Engstrom and Monroe 2006; Nalder 2007). In addition, strategic, quality challengers were found to be more likely to enter into a race when incumbents are termed out of office (Engstrom and Monroe 2006). This indicates that term limits could stimulate the electoral environment through voter mobilization efforts of more strategic candidates entering races than prior to the implementation of term limits. However, Maskett and Lewis's (2007) study of California indicates no significant difference in the vote margins of state legislative elections before and after the implementation of term limits. This may be due to variations in electoral competition in primary and general elections, particularly in states and districts dominated by one party. While primaries in state legislative races may be competitive, many candidates for state legislative general elections run unopposed. Indeed, in districts that have been gerrymandered for partisan purposes, primaries may be the pinnacle of competitive elections for state legislative seats. Limited multistate analyses also produced mixed results (see Cain, Hanley, and Kousser 2006; also see Niemi et al. 2006). For example, one study found that open seats were more competitive before term limits went into effect in Florida, but in Maine, competition increased following the imposition of term limits (Prier and Wagner 2009).

While the existing research is clear that term limits induce higher numbers of open-seat elections (see Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004), it is not clear whether these open seats are necessarily more competitive. Still, the theoretical argument linking open-seat elections and increased competition remains quite compelling. In addition to the increases in open seats, term limits may also increase the number of competitive elections in other ways. Term limits should produce higher numbers of candidates with electoral and legislative experience and state representatives get forced from office. With an increase in the number of quality candidates in the state, the number of competitive races should also increase. Furthermore, because quality challengers have more opportunities to run for election in term-limited states, voter turnout may be heightened due to much more sophisticated voter mobilization efforts. If this link holds, then an increase in open seats, competitive elections, and strategic politicians should all increase voter turnout, as seen in studies of competition in both congressional and state legislative races (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; G. W. Cox and Munger 1989; also see Franklin 2004).

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Yet, counter to these arguments, term limits have been found to reduce voter turnout in California state house races (Nalder 2007). This finding is quite puzzling as the study also demonstrated a simultaneous increase in the number of open-seat races. The unexpected decrease in voter participation in California's legislative elections is attributed to the effects of term limits on candidate name recognition: "Open-seat races after term limits may present a slate of even less-recognized candidates than incumbent-contested elections" (Nalder 2007, 202). This may be the result of relatively stringent term limits policies in the state. California has a lifetime limit, and prior to 2012, legislators were barred from running again after they reached a six year limit in the Assembly and an eight year limit in the Senate.[3] In contrast, in states with less stringent policies, candidates running in open-seat elections in term-limited states may already have high levels of name recognition due to a "recycling" phenomenon, where term-limited legislators from one chamber move to the other chamber to extend their legislative career. In these states, open-seat elections should stimulate voters by enhancing competition, creating an environment where experienced, quality candidates may run against one another. Many states do not have a lifetime ban of service, and allow legislators to skirt term limits by moving between the upper and lower chambers. Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell (2004), for example, observe that some term-limited state senators ran for election in the lower chamber when their tenure in the state senate was over. They note that this is "a process virtually nonexistent prior to the implementation of term limits" (Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004, 370).

This point is important to consider, because states with more lenient limits have had little-to-no change or even a decrease in legislative turnover (Sarbaugh-Thompson 2010). As a result, a lack of candidate name recognition in California may be driven by the state's relatively stringent restrictions on cycling through the upper and lower chambers (Nalder 2007). However, the majority of term-limited states allow for cycling of candidates between chambers. In these states, name recognition, along with strategic, quality candidates, may be a factor in stimulating higher levels of political participation by the electorate.

Although term limits advocates may have wanted to oust incumbents and increase vote choice for citizens, name recognition in these lower profile elections may also help to draw voters to the polls and down the ballot. Term limits also increase the number of state senate candidates in elections for the U.S. House, and the overlap between state and Congressional districts can make these races particularly competitive (Powell 2000). In such instances, roll-off rates should also be reduced. Again, most term-limited states allow consecutive service in the upper and lower chambers, so we expect to find a clear increase in voter participation when a wider sample of elections and states are analyzed.

Term Limits, Government Responsiveness, and Voter Turnout

Because term limits are associated with an increase in the number of competitive, open-seat races, term-limited legislatures should subsequently see higher electoral participation. In addition, term limits also may alter the behavior of legislators while in office in a way that also encourages voter turnout. A classic argument for limiting

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the tenure of politicians is to reduce complacency toward constituent concerns and the energy spent on gearing up for the next election. The idea is that term-limited legislators will spend less time on activities such as fundraising and meeting with interest groups, and more time on legislative activities that address more fundamental constituent concerns (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Carey et al. 2006; Kousser 2005). Members of legislatures without term limits may be so ensconced in their office that incumbency advantage allows for little threat of reprisal at the polls if they do not tend to constituents' interests. With this logic, term limits are supposed to create a legislature with representatives who are much more "civic minded" and better reflect the district population.

Supporting the latter claim of term-limit advocates, Chen and Niou's (2005) work indicates that term limits may produce legislators who are closer to the median voter. This means that policy platforms expand over a greater number of constituent interests. However, critics of term limits point to an opposite effect. Term-limited legislators may shirk their representative duties because there is not any fear they will be punished at the polls (Rothenburg and Sanders 2000). Alternatively, more recent work at the aggregate level illustrates that term-limited legislatures seem to increase particularistic spending (Herron and Shotts 2006) and bill introduction (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Carey et al. 2006; Chen and Niou 2005; Kousser 2005).[4] Pork barrel policies and increased spending may be part of the incentive structure for term-limited legislators who look to continue their political careers in the other legislative chamber, in statewide office, or in Congress. Thus, the increased policy outputs and legislative activity of term-limited legislatures have the potential to increase citizen trust in legislators if this increased output is in line with public preferences. This affinity toward government may give citizens a sense of control over politics and a sense of political efficacy, which increases the propensity to vote (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Putnam 2000). In contrast, increase in policy outputs or bill introductions by inexperienced members may cause quite a bit of anxiety among segments of the electorate—especially if they concern contentious issues. This type of heightened awareness may also drive mobilization to the polls.

Altogether, the theoretical implications suggest that voter turnout in state legislative elections will increase when term limits are imposed. Increased bill introduction and policy outputs in term-limited states (Herron and Shotts 2006; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Carey et al. 2006; Chen and Niou 2005; Kousser 2005) should provide a contextual cue for citizens that their efforts at the polls matter. Furthermore, states with legislative term limits will have more open-seat elections (see Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004; Nalder 2007), which tend to create more competitive elections between strategic, quality candidates, including legislators that cycle between the upper and lower chambers (Francis and Kenny 1997; Gaddie and Bullock 2000; Powell 2000). Existing research has clearly demonstrated that competitive elections increase voter turnout at both the national and state levels (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; G. W. Cox and Munger 1989; Hill and Leighley 1992; Rosenstone and Hanson 2003), so increases in competition driven by enforcement of term limits should also lead to higher voting rates. Although term limits in California have been associated with lower voter

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participation due to a lack of name recognition in state legislative races, this may be due to the unique political environment and institutional arrangements of the state, rather than the result of a more generalizable effect. In light of these concerns, we reexamine the effects of term limits on voter participation across the United States in a wide variety of institutional settings.

Research Design and Data

To assess the effect of legislative term limits on voting rates in state legislation elections, we analyze all available state legislative returns for lower chamber elections from 1988 to 2010. This allows for both a cross-sectional comparison of voting rates between states with term limits and those without term limits as well as longitudinal comparisons. This period of time covers elections prior to the first adoption of state legislative term limits in 1990 and well before term limits first began to force legislators out of office in 1996. Thus, we can examine voting rates both before and after the passage and implementation of legislative term limits.

However, this broad cross-sectional approach may be biased by potential selection effects deriving from the states' decisions to adopt legislative term limits in the first place. To address this bias, we also conduct a parallel set of analyses that only include states that have adopted legislative term limits. By restricting the sample to states where term limits were enacted, we effectively control for factors that lead to the adoption of legislative term limits and can focus the analyses on whether the actual *enforcement* of term limits affects voter participation. Importantly, the restricted sample includes several states that passed legislative term limits, but then repealed them before they went into effect. One state, Oregon, adopted and implemented term limits for two elections before repealing them in 2002. Thus, the restricted sample of state that passed term limits still allows for a cross-section comparison to states that have not implemented term limits while controlling for potential selection effects.

The voting rate data were collected from each state's Secretary of State official election returns and the Klarner et al. (2013) State Legislative Election Returns dataset. The analyses begin at the state level, with aggregate voter turnout rates measured as the total number of votes cast in each state's lower chamber legislative elections divided by the number of eligible voters in the state.[5] This approach necessitates the exclusion of Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Oklahoma because these states do not report accurate vote totals for uncontested elections. In addition, Louisiana is omitted due to its run-off election system, and Nebraska is excluded due to its unicameral, nonpartisan legislature. This leaves 42 states in the broad cross-sectional analysis. For the same reasons, the restricted sample consists of 16 of the 21 states that have passed legislative term limits. Figure 1 shows the means and ranges of voter turnout in our sample. Aggregate voter turnout rates in these elections range from 23.2% (Arizona in 1998) to 68.7% (Maine in 2004), with a mean turnout rate of 47.4%.

In addition to these two analyses, we also present two robustness checks. First, we analyze the effect of term limits on aggregate roll-off rates, examining the difference

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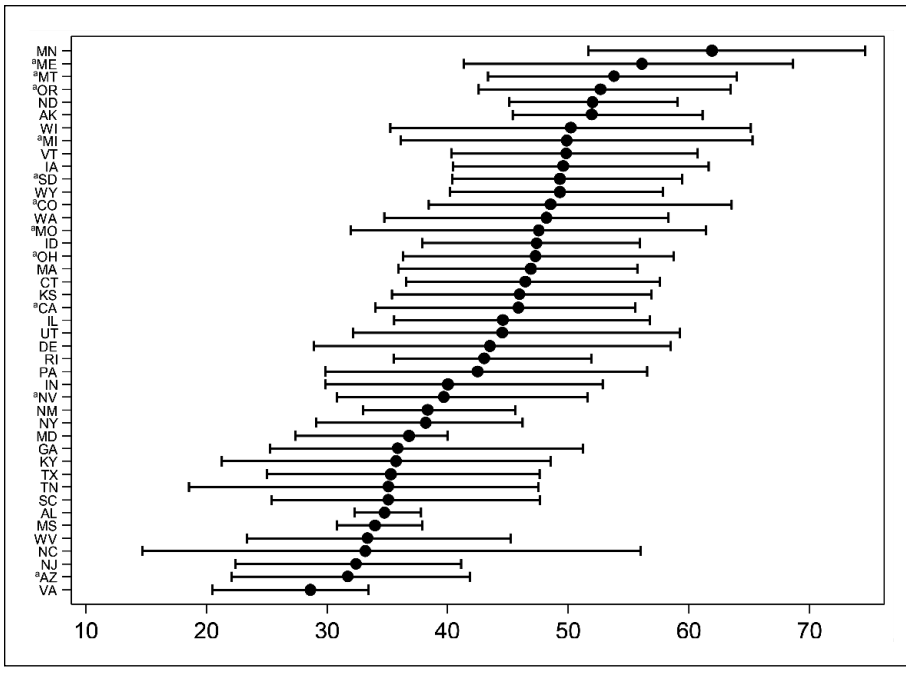


Figure 1. Mean and range of voting rates in sample state legislative elections, 1988–2010.
[a]States with term limits; does not include ID, MA, UT, WA, or WY, which repealed term-limit laws before they went into effect; OR repealed term limits in 2002, after two elections where they were enforced.

in turnout rates for the top of the ticket races to voting rates in state legislative elections. Roll-off rates range from roughly 0% to nearly 20% in the sample. Next, we analyze voter turnout rates at the district level, operationalizing the voter turnout rate for each race as the total number of votes cast in each district divided by the estimated number of eligible voters in the district.[6] This district-level analysis not only provides a check on the aggregate-level results, but also allows for the inclusion of all states except for Louisiana and Nebraska due to their unique electoral and legislative designs, respectively.

The primary independent variable for all the analyses gauges the term limits policies of the state legislatures. Although 21 states have adopted legislative term limits, only 15 still had term-limited legislatures in effect by 2010 (see Table 1). Clearly, the stringency of these limits varies across the states. Some states, such as Nevada, have relatively long-term limits of 12 years per chamber. In addition, some states allow legislators to cycle back and forth between the upper and lower chambers. Other states, such as Michigan and Arkansas, have much shorter limits of six years in the state assembly and eight years in the senate and do not allow cycling between the chambers. The differences in the types of term limits can significantly affect legislative activities

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Table 1. State Legislative Term Limits as of 2010.

State	Year adopted	Year of impact	Year repealed	Lower chamber limit	Upper chamber limit	Lower chamber term-limitedness
Arkansas	1992	1998	—	6	8	2.41
Michigan	1992	1998	—	6	8	1.57
California	1990	1996	—	6	8	1.39
Oregon	1992	1998	2002	6	8	1.1
Missouri	1992	2002	—	8	8	0.69
Ohio	1992	2000	—	8	8	0.59
Montana	1992	2000	—	8	8	0.39
Colorado	1990	1998	—	8	8	0.27
Maine	1993	1996	—	8	8	0.21
Florida	1992	2000	—	8	8	0.18
Arizona	1992	2000	—	8	8	0.17
South Dakota	1992	2000	—	8	8	0.04
Nevada	1996	2010	—	12	12	−0.02
Oklahoma	1990	2004	—	12[a]	12[a]	−0.02
Louisiana	1995	2007	—	12	12	−0.2
Nebraska	2000	2006	—	—	8	[b]
Idaho	1994	—	2002	8	8	—
Massachusetts	1994	—	1997	8	8	—
Utah	1994	—	2003	12	12	—
Washington	1992	—	1998	8	8	—
Wyoming	1992	—	2004	8	8	—

Source. National Conference of State Legislatures; Sarbaugh-Thompson (2010).
[a]In Oklahoma, the limit is a total of 12 years in the legislature. The total time may be split between the two chambers, or spent entirely in one.
[b]The Nebraska Senate has a term-limitedness score of 0.35, but is not included here because the election data are from lower chamber elections.

of legislators (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Carey et al. 2006; Chen and Niou 2005; Herron and Shotts 2006; Kousser 2005) and, in particular, legislative turnover (see Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004). States with stringent term limits policies have experienced a significant increase in turnover rates since the limits took effect, but states with more generous limits have had no change or even in some cases, a decrease in legislative turnover (Sarbaugh-Thompson 2010).

These important variations in term limits policies can be accounted for using Sarbaugh-Thompson's (2010) measure of Term-Limitedness, adjusted for cycling. This measure compares turnover rates in the decade prior to the imposition of term limits to the mandatory turnover driven by term limits. The measure is then adjusted to account for the ability of legislators to cycle between chambers in some states. In total, 10 of the states in the first analysis have a positive Term-Limitedness score for at least one election year, indicating an increase in turnover rates are caused by term limits. These scores range from a low of 0.04, for South Dakota, to 2.41, for Arkansas. Nonterm-limited states have a Term-Limitedness score of zero.[7] States with term limits also have a score of zero until the year of impact.[8] The average voter turnout

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rate for lower chamber elections in these 10 states, across the 62 elections where term limits were enforced, is 48.5%, significantly ($p < .01$) higher than the rate of 42.9% in all other states and elections. However, the turnout rate among actively term-limited states is only marginally higher than the rate of other states in the sample that have adopted term limits but do have them in effect at the time of the election, at 47%.

Obviously, there are a myriad of other factors that also influence voter turnout in state legislative elections and are included in the analyses. In addition to term limits, other institutional characteristics of the legislatures may also affect voter turnout. The size of legislatures relative to citizens has been shown to be an important factor, with larger representative-to-voter ratios increasing turnout (Hibbing and Alford 1990; Oppenheimer 1996). Multimember districts (MMD), meanwhile, may drive down turnout (E. M. Cox 1994; Francia and Herrnson 2004). This factor is operationalized as the proportion of seats in a legislature that is elected from MMDs. Finally, the models include the Squire Index of legislative professionalism (Squire 1992; 2007; 2012). Legislators in more professionalized legislatures tend to dedicate more time contacting constituents and to campaigning, which may result in more interest in legislative elections among constituents (Squire 1993).

Electoral rules also affect voter turnout in legislative elections. State registration requirements can impose costs on voters that may decrease voter turnout rates (e.g., Highton 1997; 2004; Highton and Wolfinger 1998). Registration costs are operationalized here as the number of days prior to an election that voters need to register to be eligible to vote. Ballot design may also affect voting rate for down-ballot races such as state legislative elections. In particular, states that allow straight-ticket voting are likely to have relatively higher voting rates for state legislative races due to the automatic decrease in ballot roll-off that results from this option. Each model includes a dichotomous indicator of whether the state offers a straight-ticket voting option. Direct democracy institutions, such as ballot initiatives and referenda, may have an "educative" effect on citizens, prompting them to be more interested and involved in politics and elections (Grummel 2008; Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001; Tolbert, McNeal, and Smith 2003). Because the use of ballot initiatives varies significantly across direct democracy states due to differences in institutional arrangements (Bowler and Donovan 2004), we account for the "educative" effect of direct democracy by including the logged count of ballot measures in each state in the analyses (e.g., Pippen, Bowler, and Donovan 2002).[9]

Beyond the institutional factors that shape an electorate, the social and political environment is also a significant influence on voter turnout. In particular, any model of voter turnout must account for the level of competition in the elections. Voters are significantly more likely to turn out to vote in a competitive electoral environment (e.g., Caldeira and Patterson 1982; G. W. Cox and Munger 1989). We operationalize this concept as party competition for control of government using a folded Ranney Index (e.g., Ranney 1976). We also account for the national attention to elections by including a dichotomous indicator of presidential elections.[10] Other contextual factors included in our analyses include the logged income per capita in each state and a

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Herfindahl index of minority diversity (Hero and Tolbert 1996). The models also account for important temporal effects, with indicators of presidential election years, election years using new legislative districts, and a year trend variable.

Aggregate State Participation in Legislative Elections

The analysis begins with linear regression models of the aggregate voter turnout rates in state legislative races from 1988 to 2010, estimated with robust standard errors. The results for both the sample of 42 states and the restricted sample of 16 states that have passed term limits are presented in Table 2.

Both models display substantial explanatory power, explaining 72% and 76% of the variation in voter turnout rates in the states, respectively. Each model reveals statistically significant effects of most of the independent variables, including the term-limitedness. States with term limits in effect have significantly higher voter turnout rates in state legislative elections, on average, compared with those states where term limits are not in effect. Oregon, with a term-limitedness score of 1.1, would be predicted to increase voter turnout in state legislative elections by 2.5 to 2.8 percentage points during the years in which their term limits were in effect. The most term-limited state, Arkansas, would increase voter turnout in state legislative elections by 5.4 to 6.1 percentage points once term limits are in effect. Given the relatively low levels of participation of the voter eligible population in most state legislative elections, the magnitude of these effects for states with more restrictive term limits is substantial. However, in states that are less encumbered by term limits, the effects are smaller, with predicted increases of less than 1 percentage point. Although the effects of term limits are modest, they do show significant and meaningful impacts on the aggregate voting rates in state legislative elections.

Moving down the models, nearly all the other independent variables show statistically significant effects in the expected direction. For the larger sample of states, larger legislator-to-citizen ratios and higher income levels are both associated with increased voter turnout. Multimember districts seem to depress voter turnout, as do earlier registration deadlines and more diverse electorates. As expected, the number of ballot measures being considered, increased party competition, and legislative professionalism are all positively associated with voter turnout. Presidential election years and elections following redistricting efforts both have positive impacts on voter turnout.

Ballot Roll-Off Rates

As a robustness check of the initial results, we also examine ballot roll-off rates for state legislative elections. Ballot roll-off is measured as the difference between the voter turnout rate for the top-of-the-ticket election—a presidential, gubernatorial, or Senate race—and the total turnout rate for the lower chamber elections. Using this alternative dependent variable provides a good way to test how the characteristics of the legislature, itself, draw or deter voters from participating in state legislative

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Table 2. Determinants of Voting Rates in State Legislative Elections, 1988–2010.

	All states		Passed term limits	
Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	Coefficient	*SE*
Term-Limitedness [+]	2.249*	(1.102)	2.537*	(1.118)
Legislator-Citizen Ratio [+]	2.632**	(0.436)	0.569	(0.674)
Multimember Districts [−]	−4.085**	(0.901)	−2.553**	(1.031)
Registration Difficulty [−]	−0.241**	(0.031)	−0.118**	(0.041)
Straight-ticket Voting [+]	−1.019	(0.647)	0.204	(0.946)
Ballot Measure Use (log) [+]	2.203**	(0.262)	2.083**	(0.320)
Legislative Professionalism [+]	9.699**	(2.639)	8.117*	(4.113)
Party Competition [+]	13.295**	(2.881)	10.635**	(4.099)
Income per capita (log) [+]	0.222**	(0.073)	0.066	(0.112)
Diversity Index [−]	−0.133**	(0.021)	−0.354**	(0.044)
Presidential Election [+]	12.782**	(0.522)	12.442**	(0.683)
New Districts [+]	1.443**	(0.590)	1.203	(0.759)
Year	−0.028	(0.091)	0.035	(0.146)
Constant	78.690	(180.968)	−32.327	(290.641)
N	486		190	
R^2	.723		.763	

Note. The first model includes 43 states, excluding AR, FL, LA, HI, NE, NH, and OK due to data limitations. The second model includes 16 states that adopted legislative term limits, excluding AR, FL, LA, NE, and OK due to data limitations. Robust standard errors are presented in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$; p values from one-tailed tests as indicated by bracketed signs.

elections. Roll-off rates should better isolate factors specific to state legislatures that may affect whether voters choose to participate in these down-ballot races.

The models are specified exactly as in the prior analysis on voter turnout, but the expectations of the effects of several of the variables are different. Most important, if term-limitedness does increase voter turnout in state legislative elections, then it should have a negative impact on roll-off rates. In other words, term limits should make it less likely that voters will stop voting after the top-of-the-ticket races and more likely that they will proceed down the ballot to the state legislative races. As in the first set of analyses, the models are estimated using regression with standard errors clustered by state. The results are presented in Table 3.

In general, these results support the findings' first set of analyses. Consistent with our hypothesis, term-limited state legislative elections experience significantly less ballot roll-off compared with elections with nonterm-limited legislatures. States with high term-limitedness scores are associated, on average, with roll-off rates of about 1 to 4 percentage points less than states with term-limitedness scores of 0. Other term-limited states have more modest, yet still significant, declines in roll-off rates. These negative effects are clearly consistent with the argument that term limits can increase voter participation in state legislative elections.

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Table 3. Determinants of Ballot Roll-Off Rates in State Legislative Elections, 1988–2010.

	All states		Passed term limits	
Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	Coefficient	*SE*
Term-Limitedness [−]	−1.601**	(0.400)	−0.984**	(0.412)
Legislator-Citizen Ratio [−]	0.625	(0.190)	1.509	(0.389)
Multimember Districts [+]	2.417**	(0.470)	3.934**	(0.538)
Registration Difficulty	0.044**	(0.012)	0.091**	(0.019)
Straight-ticket Voting [−]	0.562	(0.307)	−1.448**	(0.423)
Ballot Measure Use (log)	−0.130	(0.113)	0.191	(0.170)
Legislative Professionalism [−]	0.490	(1.353)	3.944	(1.693)
Party Competition	−1.458	(1.571)	−0.759	(2.076)
Income per capita (log)	0.045	(0.042)	0.131*	(0.054)
Diversity Index	0.033**	(0.010)	0.028	(0.019)
Presidential Election [+]	3.001**	(0.265)	2.166*	(0.351)
New Districts [−]	0.402	(0.304)	0.596	(0.477)
Year	0.003	(0.058)	−0.049	(0.074)
Constant	−4.960	(116.217)	93.855	(146.776)
N	471		190	
R^2	.312		.545	

Note. The first model includes 42 states, excluding AR, FL, LA, HI, MS, NE, NH, and OK due to data limitations. The second model includes 16 states that adopted legislative term limits, excluding AR, FL, LA, NE, and OK due to data limitations. Robust standard errors are presented in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$; p values from one-tailed tests as indicated by bracketed signs.

District-Level Participation in Legislative Elections

Although the analyses show increased voter turnout at the state level, this effect may not necessarily hold in individual legislative districts. Thus, we also analyze voter turnout at the district level. This also allows us to incorporate states that do not accurately report vote totals for uncontested elections, bringing the sample size up to 48 states in the larger samples and 18 states in the sample of states that have passed term limits. As described earlier, voter turnout rates are derived from the total votes cast in each district divided by the estimated Voting Eligible Population (VEP) in each district. We model voter turnout at the district level similarly to the aggregate models presented above. However, because the data include uncontested races, we also include an indicator of these races. Uncontested races are likely to have much lower voter turnout as the outcome of the election is already determined.

The models are estimated as linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on the district. The results are presented in Table 4. Both models are remarkably consistent with the aggregate-level analyses. Term-Limitedness is significantly associated with higher voting rates. For Oregon, with a Term-Limitedness score of 1.1, this is a 1.8 to 2.8 percentage point increase in voter turnout at the district level. For Arkansas,

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Table 4. Determinants of District-Level Voting Rates in State Legislative Elections, 1988–2010.

	All states		Passed term limits	
Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	Coefficient	*SE*
Term-Limitedness [+]	2.553**	(0.728)	1.608**	(0.410)
Challenged Race [+]	11.504**	(0.385)	13.318**	(0.344)
Legislator-Citizen Ratio [+]	11.832**	(1.437)	2.516**	(0.487)
Multimember District [−]	6.393	(4.433)	−6.358**	(1.929)
Registration Difficulty [−]	0.220	(0.040)	0.119	(0.029)
Straight-ticket Voting [+]	2.517*	(1.161)	0.991*	(0.527)
Ballot Measure Use (log) [+]	1.057**	(0.299)	1.619**	(0.205)
Legislative Professionalism [+]	27.592**	(5.064)	2.881	(2.204)
Party Competition [+]	−2.385	(2.673)	16.806**	(2.558)
Income per capita (log) [+]	0.435**	(0.114)	0.513**	(0.080)
Diversity Index [−]	−0.050*	(0.026)	−0.250**	(0.035)
Presidential Election [+]	11.582**	(0.455)	12.736**	(0.155)
New Districts [+]	1.651**	(0.308)	1.011**	(0.180)
Year	0.061	(0.193)	−0.405**	(0.099)
Constant	−127.730	(382.828)	810.211**	(194.445)
N	50,924		18,276	
R^2	.156		.311	

Note. The first model includes 48 states, excluding LA and NE due to data limitations. The second model includes 19 states that adopted legislative term limits, excluding LA and NE due to data limitations. Robust standard errors, clustered on the district, are presented in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$; p values from one-tailed tests as indicated by bracketed signs.

the increase in voter turnout at the district level associated with term limits is 3.9 to 6.2 percentage points, on average. The sizes of these effects at the district level are quite similar to the estimates derived from the aggregate-level analyses.

The models also show a large and statistically significant effect of having a challenged race. When given a choice of candidates, voting rates increase by well over 10 percentage points. This finding, while not surprising, is consistent with the hypothesized effect of term limits. With fewer incumbents allowed to run for reelection in term-limited legislatures, strategic candidates may be more likely to enter a legislative race in the first place. Thus, the effect of term limits may be even larger than the Term-Limitedness coefficient suggests.

Discussion

Advocates for legislative term limits contend that these reforms should increase voter turnout. The logic is that forcing turnover in the legislature will reduce the number of uncontested elections and increase the frequency of competitive elections—both of which should give more choice to citizens while increasing voter turnout. The

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proximate effect of term limits to increase turnover in state legislatures has been clearly shown (e.g., Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004), yet how this increased turnover has affected the legislative and representative system is not quite as obvious (see Caress et al. 2003; Carey et al. 2006; Mondak 1995). Indeed, little research has focused on how turnover has affected voter participation, which is the purpose of our inquiry. Important to testing the theoretical arguments of term-limit advocates, this study provides a broad comparative examination of how term limits in state legislature may affect voter turnout. Furthermore, by restricting the analysis to states that have passed term limits, we are able to address selection effects driven by states' adoption of term limits in the first place and still show a consistent positive impact on voting rates.

Contrary to prior research on California, but consistent with theoretical arguments of reformers, we find that term limits are significantly associated with higher turnout in state legislative elections. This effect is not only statistically significant, but substantively consequential as well. For states with strict term limits, voter turnout in state legislative elections is predicted to increase by up to 6 percentage points, on average, compared with states without term limits in effect. This effect is also evident in ballot roll-off rates, with term limits associated with lower roll-off between the top-of-the-ticket and state legislative races. These results are consistent with prior works that find that term limits increase electoral competition (Daniel and Lott 1997; Engstrom and Monroe 2006; Nalder 2007; Niemi et al. 2006). Furthermore, the results at the state level were mirrored in the district-level analyses.

While the analyses presented here show a significant and consistent relationship between legislative term limits and increased voting rates in general elections for state legislators, two important aspects of this relationship deserve additional scrutiny in future research. First, we contend that effects of term limits on voting rates are primarily driven by increases in electoral competition associated with fewer unchallenged races and more open-seat races. Consistent with this theoretical argument, extant empirical research confirms that term-limited states have fewer unchallenged races and more open-seat races. Future research should disentangle the separate proximate effects of term limits and explore the hypothesized causal chain, from term limits enforcement, to increases in challenged and open-seat races, subsequent increases in electoral competition, and, ultimately, to increases in voter turnout rates.

Next, future research should examine how legislative term limits affect primary election voting rates. While we find a substantial increase in voting rates in general elections, the proposed causal mechanisms related to incumbent turnover likely also affect primary elections. This is especially important in districts that strongly favor one party. Although term limits can force incumbents out of office and create more open seats, they do not guarantee that challengers from an opposing party will be able to credibly challenge that seat. Thus, term limits may be also an important factor in shaping the electorate in primary elections.

In sum, each of our analyses showed clear and consistent evidence that term limits substantially increase voter turnout in state legislative elections. While many studies of legislative term limits have highlighted negative effects on the legislative process and policy outcomes (Kousser 2005; 2006; Lewis 2012; Padró i Miquel and Snyder

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2006; Sarbaugh-Thompson et al. 2006; Uppal 2010), we demonstrate that these reforms may also have positive impacts for the electorate by increasing civic engagement. This finding also highlights the need to explore the relationship between term limits and democratic representation by accounting for differences in the size and makeup of electorates between states. With more voters participating in elections, the electorate, itself, may be more representative of the broader public will. In turn, this could potentially have positive effects on policy representation. Thus, any assessment of the impacts of legislative term limits should extend beyond the legislature itself, and also consider the effects on the electorate.

These results also have implications beyond the debate over term limits in the American states. Indeed, the study highlights the important link between electoral competition and political participation. It also points to the need to assess whether open-seat elections are even more competitive when quality candidates and experienced politicians run against each other. Although we find that legislative term limits are one institutional tool that can increase participation in elections that traditionally see few ballots cast, other institutional reforms that aim to increase competition, such as redistricting commissions and public financing of campaigns, may also have the indirect effect of spurring voter turnout and civic participation.

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Notes

1. See Table 1.
2. However, research illustrates that in term-limited states, interest groups have actually increased in their influence on public policy formation (Kousser 2005; Opheim 1994).
3. Currently, California has a 12-year lifetime limit.
4. Consistent with these findings, studies have also shown that retiring Congressional members tend to spend more time on legislation (see Herrick, Moore, and Hibbing 1994).
5. The estimates of the Voting Eligible Population (VEP) are from McDonald's data archive, accessed at http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.
6. Because legislative districts are required to be roughly equal in size, district VEP is estimated by dividing state VEP by the number of seats in the lower chamber of the legislatures.
7. States with less stringent policies often experienced no change or a decrease in turnover after the imposition of term limits, resulting in a negative term-limitedness score. We treat these states as effectively nonterm-limited, with a term-limitedness score of 0, as the term limits policy in these legislatures does not seem to change the nature of state legislative elections in terms of open or uncontested seats.

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8. We expect increases in voter turnout to be primarily driven by increases in open seats and the competition that comes with enforcement of term limits, not the passage of the policy. Thus, this approach represents a conservative test of our hypotheses because any anticipatory effects would dampen differences in voter turnout rates.
9. The logged count of ballot measures is used because some states, such as California, use these measures far more frequently than most. This creates a nonlinear relationship, where the effect of each additional ballot measure should decline as the overall count grows. While the logged count produces a better model fit, using a simple count does not significantly change the results.
10. Other top-of-the ticket indicators for gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections were also included in alternative specifications, but only the presidential elections showed significant increases in turnout for state legislative elections. Including these additional contextual variables did not change the results or add to the explanatory power of the model.

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