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Idaho Common Sense™



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Let's return to a citizen government

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Our Founding Fathers believed serving as President or in Congress was a duty to country, a sacrifice for country, a calling. They did not anticipate Congress becoming a career choice with members subservient to the power of the incumbency and the money it attracts.

Rather, the Founding Fathers intended a weak federal government, subservient to much stronger state governments that served a powerful citizenry. Thomas Jefferson resisted all attempts to foster a strong federal government, adamant the power must rest with the people.

What went wrong? Does the power rest with the people, as it should? Does Congress do the peoples' work? The movie Charlie Wilson's War explains how well Congress tends to the people. Asked by a political activist, "Why do congressmen talk so much and do nothing," Charlie Wilson responded, "Tradition mostly."

The Founding Fathers intended a citizen government, run by people like you and me, serving our country, doing the peoples' work, and then going home.

From our country's infancy, those with power and money learned the value of "investing" in incumbents. Do they see donating to incumbents as a civic duty or do they consider it nothing more than a business investment awaiting a return? Incumbents and powerful money feed off one another, leading to moral and ethical compromise. According to Bob Beckel, a democratic strategist, "The longer an incumbent stays in power, the greater the chance for corruption. Almost every scandal in Congress, going back decades, involves senior members." Sadly, we saw this again this week when 40-year incumbent Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska was indicted for accepting graft.

Has Congress replaced service to the people with service to self, doing

whatever needed to stay in office, to get re-elected, to maintain power? Might the only real change in Congress be the changing names of those who get caught?

Albert Einstein best explained our many failed attempts to control Congress when he said; "The definition of stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." To solve the failed incumbent system we need to learn from Einstein, proposing a different solution, allowing for a different outcome. We need a constitutional amendment limiting both the President and Congress to one 8 year term, with an election every November replacing 1/8 of our Congress. Term limits would help us reclaim our government, return it to the intended citizen government, and attract those who will do the peoples' work in Congress. History has shown we simply cannot outvote the power of money.

Blinded to the problems created by careers in Congress, Senator Orrin Hatch, a 22 year member of the United States Senate, outlined in a 1995 article why we must have incumbents in Congress. He claimed term limits would remove good incumbents, the senators and representatives most capable of resisting the powers of the federal bureaucracy. Did he forget it was these very incumbents who created and sustain that failed federal bureaucracy? Further, according to Hatch, only incumbents can navigate their way through the complicated processes of Congress. Again, did he forget it was the incumbents who created those unmanageable processes? He argues that term limits would abolish the "valuable" seniority system needed for Congress to function properly. But, does the seniority system benefit the people or does it benefit the incumbent, allowing them to gain power and the money it draws? Last, Senator Hatch

believes the 22nd Amendment, limiting the President to two terms in office, created a weak second term President, proving the failure of term limits. Might it actually prove that one term is the ideal solution? In summary, Senator Hatch tells us to ignore the words of Einstein, continue with the status quo, and hope for a different outcome.

Contrary to Senator Hatch's assertions, I believe we have decades of proof that the congressional incumbent system is a failure. Further, I believe there are more than enough competent people in our country willing to serve in government who have no interest in a career in government. There are ordinary citizens who are willing to serve for a finite time and then return to civilian life. An additional benefit of term limits might be the age of those who run for office. The single eight year term might dissuade younger potential candidates who may not be able to leave their vocation for eight years as easily as older people could. We might see more people running for office who are in their 50s, 60s, and even 70s; people more seasoned in life, more likely to do the peoples' work. Let us demand to return to a citizen government. Thomas Jefferson would be proud, seeing us disassemble the federalist system and return the power to the people, as intended.

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