

## How term limits reshaped Florida politics — for better or worse

By [Mcclatchy News Service](#)  
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TALLAHASSEE -- Four decades ago, a respected political think tank rated the Florida Legislature one of the best in the country for its enlightened leadership, expert staff and bipartisan willingness to tackle tough issues.

Today, the Legislature's longest-serving member has a very different way of describing it.

"It's terrible, just terrible," said Sen. Dennis Jones, a moderate Pinellas County Republican in his 31st year of lawmaking. "You just don't have the camaraderie you had years before."

Jones and others are exasperated at what they see: excessive and often scripted partisanship, obsessive and loosely regulated special-interest fundraising and harshly negative campaigning.

"It seems to me that it's changed almost entirely for the worse," said Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte, a Democratic lawmaker from Miami-Dade in the 1960s and early 1970s who later served as president of the American Bar Association and Florida State University. "We were far less partisan than they are today ... but the worst thing is term limits."

Observers in both parties unanimously agree, saying term limits have created a political revolving door, sapped the Capitol of much of its institutional wisdom and made the 40-member Senate vastly more influential and experienced than the 120-member House, which is now largely a training ground for future senators.

**IN THE HANDS OF FEW**To understand the modern Florida Legislature, it's necessary to examine term limits through the two prisms that dominate the Capitol: power and money.

Tallahassee veterans point to a top-down style of leadership that concentrates power in the hands of a few and stifles

dissent.

“There’s more power in the speaker and Senate president than when I served,” said Ron Richmond, a lobbyist and Republican House member from Pasco County from 1972-84. “Back then, the committee chairmen had a lot more authority and were able to exert their power. I don’t know whether today’s leaders are better at using their power or whether it’s an abdication by the members.”

One reason chairmen had more clout in the 1970s was their staying power. Colorful lawmakers such as Fred Jones, Herb Morgan and Ralph Turlington would hold the same chairmanship for six or eight years, consolidating power while becoming unquestioned experts in transportation, the budget and education.

Most committee chairmanships now change hands every two years because term limits don’t allow enough time for long apprenticeships on tax policy, insurance or healthcare regulation. To that end, today’s less-experienced legislators must rely more on the knowledge of staff members and lobbyists.

Even lobbyists are vocal in their criticism, seemingly indifferent to possible retribution.

Richmond blames term limits for nurturing an atmosphere dominated by spin and talking points over substantive debate and the soaring oratory of decades past.

“Those talking points to me are B.S.,” said Richmond, a fixture on the fourth-floor Capitol Rotunda where lobbyists congregate. “They all stand up with their little one piece of paper and they don’t even know what’s in their own bills half the time.”

**POPULARITY CONTEST** Another by-product of term limits are the frenzied fights among newly-elected lawmakers to nail down the House speakership years ahead of time, before the newbies have even cast a vote.

These premature popularity contests, underwritten with lobbyists’ money, have had one distinctly disastrous result: the selection of Destin Republican Ray Sansom as speaker for 2009-2010. He resigned after being indicted for allegedly mispending taxpayer money.

Experts admit that before term limits existed, the Legislature was far from perfect, with its secrecy and back-scratching, all-night sessions sometimes fueled by alcohol and sometimes arrogant politicians impervious to voter disapproval at election time. The Legislature of decades ago was dominated by powerful singular personalities — men such as Dempsey Barron, Don Tucker, Mallory Horne and W.D. Childers.

The capital in Tallahassee has always been geographically isolated from the state's population centers, so lobbyists and their money have always had a disproportionately strong voice.

The lofty ranking of the 1970s Legislature came from the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Longtime professor Alan Rosenthal says term limits and increased partisan competition have reshaped many legislatures, not just Florida's.

"You've got a greater emphasis on bottom-line politics and less emphasis on innate decisions," Rosenthal said. "The focus has shifted."

**FUNDRAISING FRENZY** Money is an unending object of derision in Tallahassee, and term limits have accelerated the pace of fundraising.

Some freshmen House members who were elected in November have already started raising money for their 2012 campaigns and the 2011 session hasn't even begun.

Campaigns are costlier and nastier than ever, which heightens the fundraising frenzy.

Lobbyists deplore what they privately call "the shakedown or "legalized extortion racket," as dozens of faxed invitations to fundraisers flood their offices, to be inevitably followed by relentless phone solicitations for more and more checks.

"It's wrong. It's terrible," said Ken Plante, a prominent lobbyist and former Republican state senator. He blames a cottage industry of professional fundraisers and campaign consultants.

"You've got people making money off of raising money and people making money off spending money," Plante said, "and everything in politics revolves around money."

Dozens of rank-and-file lawmakers control slush funds backed with lobbyist largesse, in some cases with individual checks of \$25,000 or \$50,000, and they can legally spend the money on personal expenses.

At the same time, the gift-ban law enacted in 2006 has made the two political parties vastly more powerful money magnets, as the parties became the way for lawmakers to pay for meals, airplane trips and other expenses.

Those most pleased with how the Legislature performs are its leaders, such as Mike Haridopolos, a political science professor from the Space Coast who is Senate president.

"I think we have the most open system we've had ever," he said. "We've been running on time. We get out on time for the most part. Those late-night deals you hear about in the folklore of this building no longer exist."

Many lawmakers now concede a 12-year term limit would have been less disruptive, but sporadic reform efforts never go anywhere and won't pass this year, either.

"That bill is dead on arrival," Haridopolos said.

But not everybody hates term limits. Freshman Rep. Matt Gaetz of Destin, elected at age 28 and the son of Sen. Don Gaetz, is grateful for them.

"Without term limits, there's no sense of urgency," he said. "If you told me I had to sit around for 20 years before anybody knew my name, I'd prefer to be home working in my business."

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