

Term limits is one argument Andrus can't win

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Probably the last guy who should be promoting term limits for elected candidates is former Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus.

But that's what Andrus told the Tribune's Eric Barker.

Andrus says it's necessary to break the cycle of incumbency that allows politicians to reward themselves with privileges no ordinary citizen receives.

"I would give them two terms in the Senate and an equal number of years in the House and then they are gone," Andrus told the Tribune's Eric Barker.

But Andrus is the antithesis of term limits. He was elected four times as Idaho governor, a record. Had term limits blocked the popular Democrat's ability to seek a third and fourth term, a Republican most likely would have been elected instead.

Life in Idaho would have been much different:

- Andrus put Republican legislative majorities under pressure to find more money - not less - for public and higher education. When lawmakers failed to meet his demands, he vetoed budgets - and then hit the road urging voters to defeat those legislators. Often he prevailed.
- Without Andrus in office, nothing would have stopped the GOP from passing the toughest anti-abortion law in the U.S. and then spending hundreds of thousands of tax dollars defending it in the courts.
- Thanks to Andrus' coattails, Democrats made steady gains in the Legislature, even capturing half of the Senate. That trend helped persuade the GOP to agree to a citizens redistricting commission equally split between Republicans and Democrats.
- It was Andrus who transformed the state commerce department into an economic development juggernaut.
- Can you envision an Idaho Republican governor standing up to the Ronald Reagan and the George H.W. Bush administrations - not to mention Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho - as Andrus did in blocking nuclear waste shipments to the Idaho National Laboratory?
- Without Andrus, how much sooner would Idaho's environmental laws lose some of their teeth?

To be fair to Andrus, his terms were not served consecutively. He was elected twice in the 1970s and then returned to office in the mid-1980s. Even in some states with term limits, caps don't apply to non-consecutive terms.

But Idahoans already have been down this road.

In 1994, voters passed an initiative that imposed caps on incumbents serving in every office from school boards to governor.

They quickly became disillusioned.

Rather than ousting some entrenched member of Congress from another state - something Idahoans were powerless to do unilaterally - they found themselves on the verge of kicking out popular, effective local mayors, city councilors and school board members - often in places where it was difficult to find anyone willing to run for the jobs.

Term limits don't discriminate between the incompetent and talented. For every Bill Sali you filter out of the system, you lose a Cecil Andrus.

Plus limits would have limited effect on the Statehouse. Turnover in the legislative ranks was fairly constant with or without term limits. This year, for instance, at least one of every three legislative seats will change hands.

With the exception of Andrus and former Gov. Robert Smylie, no chief executive has been elected to more than two terms.

So in 2002, the issue was back on the ballot. By a narrow 1,889-vote margin, Idahoans repealed term limits.

Andrus knows all of this. That he still embraces the concept tells you how frustrated he's become watching the lousy job Congress is doing.

But the fact remains that a fellow who was elected four times governor - and performed the task admirably enough to have won a fifth term for the asking - is going to have a tough time making this sale. - M.T.