Term Length and the Effort of Politicians in Argentina

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Sample: 325 Legislators (254 house members and 71 senators)

Target group: Politicians and electoral candidates

Outcome of interest: Elected Official Performance

Intervention type: Legal reform

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Research Papers: Term Length and the Effort of Politicians

Partner organization(s): National Congress of Argentina

A fundamental question in constitutional design is how long public officials should serve before being replaced, since term length may affect legislative effort. Researchers examined two occasions in which an Argentine Congressional chamber was subject to randomly assigned term lengths as a result of political or constitutional changes. Assignment to a longer term increased overall legislative effort. Findings suggest that this is because longer terms allowed politicians to reap rewards from their work that were expected to arrive later in time. The effect was not driven by campaign activity crowding out legislative effort.

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A fundamental question in constitutional design is determining the optimal term length for serving in public office, before the office is up for election again. One advantage to keeping terms short is that more frequent elections may increase politicians' accountability to voters, encouraging them to work harder to please their constituents. However, shorter terms could also decrease politicians' effort on the job by increasing campaigning pressures that might distract them from their duties. Additionally, shorter terms could discourage legislative effort directed towards projects that pay off over a longer period of time, if the uncertainty of re-election leads legislators to doubt that they will benefit from their efforts. In order to determine how term length affects politicians' effort, researchers evaluated two unique instances in Argentina when legislators were randomly assigned to different term lengths.

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Argentina's National Congress is comprised of two chambers: the Chamber of Deputies (or the House of Representatives) and the Senate. Legislators in both houses are elected through a proportional representation system with a closed party list at the province level. Each province has three Senators who represent the entire province; the majority party gains two of the seats and the minority the third. Representatives serve for four-year terms, with half the House up for election every two years. Senators serve six-year terms, with renewal of one-third of the Senate every two years. Neither body faces term limits.

On two occasions, however, a chamber of Congress faced full renewal. In December 1983, Argentina returned to a democracy following a period of military rule. At that time, all 254 Representatives in the House were elected. Similarly, the entire Argentine Senate needed to be renewed in 2001, a result of a constitutional reform in 1994. After a full renewal, a fraction of seats had to be renewed after two years, while others could enjoy a longer term. Which seats were assigned to a short or long term was determined by lottery.



The National Congress of Argentina

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To measure the impact of term limits on legislative effort, researchers examined instances in 1983 and 2001 when members of the House and Senate, respectively, were randomly assigned term lengths as a result of political or constitutional changes. The Comisión de Labor Parlamentaria—the equivalent of the Rules committee in the United States—set the procedure for the random allocation of terms.

In 1983, a random half of all legislators in the House of Representatives were assigned to serve an initial term of two years, while the other half were assigned to serve a full four-year term. Each province's party delegation first randomly divided its members into two groups of equal size; delegation sizes range from two representatives from Tierra del Fuego to 70 representatives from Buenos Aires. Then, during a public session on January 20, 1984, the Parliamentary Secretary performed a lottery draw, which gave legislators in one group a four-year term and legislators in the other a two-year term. During the 2001 Senate renewal, each province's senators were randomly assigned to a next term of two, four, or six years during a public legislative session on December 12, 2001.

To determine the impact of term length, researchers tracked legislative effort during the first two years of legislators' terms, from February 1984 to December 1985 for the House of Representatives and December 2001 to December 2003 for the Senate. For House members, researchers tracked effort through six indicators, based on data availability: floor attendance, committee attendance, the number of committee bills in which the legislator participated, the number of legislation-related speeches on the floor, the number of bills introduced, and the number of bills approved. For Senate members, researchers tracked effort through three indicators, based on data availability: attendance, the number of bills introduced by the legislator, and the number of bills approved. Researchers also created an index for both legislative bodies combining these measures.

To complement the quantitative analysis and to explore explanations of the results, researchers also interviewed six legislators about their assessment of the effort metrics made available by Congress and the issue of term length.

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Politicians assigned to longer terms exerted more legislative effort than those assigned to shorter terms because they believed that they were more likely to reap the benefits of working on long-term projects, such as introducing bills.

Effect of Term Length on Legislative Effort: In both the House and the Senate, assignment to a longer term increased overall legislative effort. Effort exerted by legislators assigned to a longer term exceeded short-term legislators' efforts by 0.21 standard deviations in the House and by 0.46 standard deviations in the Senate, on the indices of legislative effort.

In the House, assignment to a four-year term increased floor attendance by 2.5 percentage points (3 percent) and committee attendance by 6.3 percentage points (12 percent), compared to the 79.8 percent floor attendance and 50.8 percent committee attendance rates among two-year-term legislators. House legislators assigned to a four-year term introduced 0.67 (95 percent) more successfully ratified bills relative to legislators in the group assigned to a two-year term. These findings were corroborated by evidence from the Senate, where assignment to a four- or six-year term increased the number of bills a Senator introduced by 0.40 (49 percent) compared to Senators assigned to a two-year term.

Factors Shaping Legislative Effort: Findings suggest that longer terms encouraged politicians to work harder not because they were less distracted by campaigning, but because the longer time horizon meant they were more likely to reap the rewards of their efforts.

Several pieces of evidence point to this conclusion. To understand whether campaign efforts crowded out legislative efforts, researchers compared levels of effort among legislators assigned to shorter or longer terms during the first half of their terms, when legislators do not campaign. Six-year Senators still exerted more legislative effort than four-year Senators during the first two years of their term—when neither group would be campaigning—suggesting that campaign pressures did not drive the discrepancy in effort. Similarly, the discrepancy in effort between two-year and four-year members in the House did not widen in the second year, when two-year members would be campaigning.

Legislators in safe seats are guaranteed reelection and therefore their effective time-horizon is indefinite. Legislators in risky seats face a very uncertain reelection, and their time-horizon is more closely shaped by the length of their term. The fact that politicians in more competitive seats were more likely than those in safe seats to increase their effort in response to longer terms in office suggests that the effect is driven by the lengthening of the time horizon.

The results of the evaluation suggest that increased job security can encourage legislators to exert more effort in office by increasing their belief that they will reap the benefits of their work over time. However, more research is needed, both within the context of legislative bodies and in private sector organizations, on how the length of tenure affects politician and employee incentives.

Dal Bó, Ernesto, and Martín A. Rossi. 2011. "Term length and the effort of politicians." The Review of Economic Studies rdr010: (1-26).