



The Vermont Legislative Research Service

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Since 1780, gubernatorial term lengths in the United States have gradually evolved from an average term length of one year to two years, to today's common term length of four years. Today, forty-eight of the fifty states have gubernatorial term lengths of four years (see Figure 1). Vermont and New Hampshire are the only remaining states in the Union with two-year terms. Thirty-three of the states with four-year gubernatorial terms also have state senate terms of four years, and state house terms of two years (see Figure 2).¹

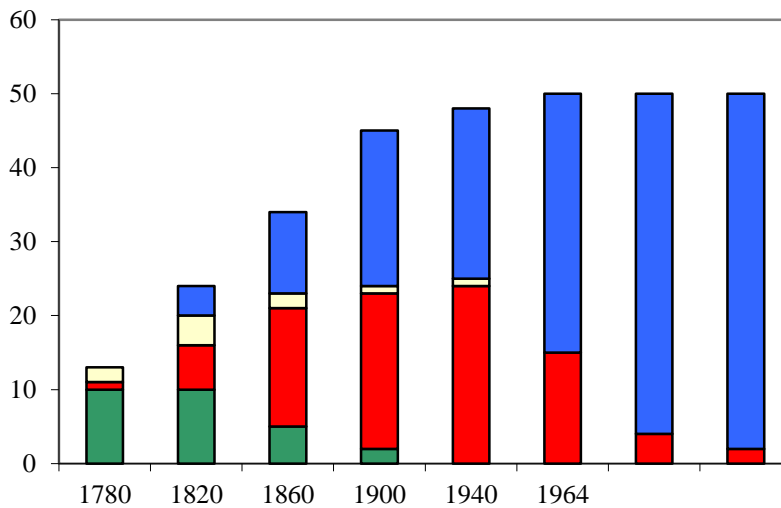


Figure 1: Historical Changes in Term Lengths

¹ Illinois and New Jersey have shifting state senate terms with two four-year terms followed by one two-year term. Nebraska has no state house but their senators have four year terms.

effective.⁶ Overall it is believed "that four-year terms are more conducive to successful incumbency ... than two-year terms. State government reformers have argued this case for years on the grounds that the longer a governor has to implement his programs, and to demonstrate his ability to administer the state's affairs, the more likely he is to be a successful governor."⁷

Current and former Vermont governors disagree on proposed constitutional amendments which would extend term lengths from two to four years. Former Governors Madeleine Kunin and Jim Douglas both support the idea of a change, while former Governor Howard Dean and current Governor Peter Shumlin favor two-year terms.^{8,9} Governors Douglas and Kunin argue that longer terms would enable future governors to engage in better long-term planning, while Shumlin and Dean both believe that the shorter two-year term increases the governor's accountability to citizens.^{10,11}

John Fitzhugh points out that in Vermont all of the governors since 1961 have served at least two terms.¹² For the purposes of this study, this fact would suggest that in the state of Vermont the two-year term is already a de facto four-year term. The argument that states with two-year term limits are more democratic than those with four-year terms assumes that a qualified candidate pool is available for each election. If there are no viable candidates that are both interested and willing to run, the elections will not be competitive and thus not democratic. Of the twenty-eight gubernatorial elections in Vermont since 1960, only eight have been competitive (political scientists typically define a competitive election as one in which the margin of victory is 10 percent or less, indicated by the line in Figures 3 and 4). Six elections were exceedingly uncompetitive, with a margin of victory over 25 percent (see Figures 3 and 4). During this same time period in New Hampshire, all governors but one served at least two terms.¹³ Of the twenty-eight gubernatorial elections in New Hampshire since 1960, twelve have been competitive and seven were exceedingly uncompetitive.

⁶ Thad Beyle, "The Governors." in *Politics in the American States*, edited by Virginia Gray and Russell L. Hanson. (Washington, D.C, CQ Press. 1999).

⁷ William Anderson, Clara Penniman and Edward W. Weidner, *The American Governor*, (New York, NY, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, Inc., 1960), Pg. 262-263.

⁸ Kinzel, Bob, "On 4-Year Terms, 2 Vermont Governors Disagree," *Vermont Public Radio*, February 8, 2016, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://digital.vpr.net/post/4-year-terms-2-vermont-governors-disagree#stream/0>.

⁹ Gram, Dave, "Dean, Douglas debate a 4-year gov term," *Burlington Free Press*, January 11, 2016, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/politics/2016/01/11/vermont-governor-howard-dean-jim-douglas/78633924/>.

¹⁰ Kinzel, Bob, "On 4-Year Terms, 2 Vermont Governors Disagree."

¹¹ Gram, Dave, "Dean, Douglas debate a 4-year gov term."

¹² John Fitzhugh, "The Executive." in *The Executive*, edited by Michael Sherman. (Burlington, VT: The University of Vermont and The Snelling Center for Government, 1999).

¹³ "New Hampshire Governor -History," *Our Campaigns*, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/ContainerHistory.html?ContainerID=155>.

Figure 3 Competitiveness in Vermont Gubernatorial Elections, 1960-30.00000912 0 612 792 reWn5 Tm0

Regulating the governor's term length is not the only means to preserve the balance of power between the state legislature and the governor. There are various institutional powers that the state legislature or the governor may use to check one another. While the Governor has specific veto, appointment, and budgetary powers, the legislature's power is derived from its independence from the executive. This permits the state legislature to review the governor's initiatives with relatively little interference. In Vermont, the state legislature possesses power over the budget process and other specific policy areas. Although the Vermont governor has the full responsibility of developing the budget, the legislature has unlimited power to change the executive budget, unlike legislatures in several other states. In addition, the Vermont governor has no item veto power (unlike the

legislature to balance gubernatorial power, then an increase in the professionalization of the legislature could alleviate some of that concern.

Vermont and New Hampshire are the only two states that have two-year gubernatorial terms. Those who argue for two-year terms including former Vermont governors Peter Shumlin and Howard Dean say it makes governors more accountable to their constituents.^{20,21} Opponents argue that two-year terms do not allow Governors enough time to engage in long term planning.^{22,23} Additionally, gubernatorial elections in both New Hampshire and Vermont have often been uncompetitive over the past 50 years and all but one governor in these states has served at least two terms.^{24,25} Vermont has one of the least professionalized legislatures in the country and that could lead to concern about relative gubernatorial power increasing if their terms were extended to four years.²⁶ Currently, the legislative branch does have the ability to change the executive budget and the governor has no item veto power.²⁷ These checks, along with an increase in professionalism of the legislature could ease the concerns about lopsided balance of power if the gubernatorial term length was changed.

This report was updated by Max Knutsen and Scott Pavsek on April 27, 2016 under the supervision of Professors Robert Bartlett, Eileen Burgin, and Anthony Gierzynski.

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Disclaimer: This report was prepared by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in