



Published: 06.04.2008

Term limits: Near-rookies fill AZ Capitol

While a few have kept seat in family, rules mean valuable experience is lost

By Daniel Scarpinato

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

PHOENIX — When state Sen. Marsha Arzberger has a question about Senate procedure, the first person she calls for advice is her husband, Gus.

The Democratic minority leader said she often takes advantage of her spouse's 15 years at the Legislature — that was before term limits pushed Gus Arzberger into retirement.

Together, the Arzbergers, Willcox ranchers, represent 24 years of experience at the Capitol. Next year, all that experience will be gone, as the state's eight-year term limit for state legislators blocks Marsha Arzberger from staying, too.

For Southern Arizona, after November, term limits may greatly erode what little influence the region has in a body dominated by Maricopa County.

While the Arzbergers have extended their time at the Capitol through a form of job sharing, others, such as veteran Sen. Victor Soltero, a Tucson Democrat, have been able stick around with some creative job hopping.

Soltero, who is voluntarily stepping down after 17 years in the Legislature, was appointed to the Senate in 1991. He moved over to the House in 2000 because of term limits, and then he was reappointed to the Senate in 2003.

But this year's election and the one in two years figure to sweep many of those grizzled veterans out, and with them much of the Legislature's institutional memory.

This year, seven of the 60 members in the House and two of the 30 in the Senate are termed-out. Assuming they win re-election this year, 16 in the House and 13 in the Senate will hit that wall in 2010.

For Arzberger, the ending is bittersweet. She said she's ready to move on and might not have run again even if she could.

But her departure also means the loss of one of the few lawmakers with the historical perspective to look back at how issues were handled in the past and sort out what didn't work — something that term-limit critics say the state desperately needs as it faces rapid growth and new challenges.

It has been 16 years since Arizona voters imposed term limits on legislators — part of a national movement that some policy experts say amounted to the most significant change in American politics in decades.

In many cases, critics say, it's legislative staffers and lobbyists who hold institutional knowledge at the state Capitol today — not lawmakers — as those who are in the know gradually trickle away.

Proponents, on the other hand, maintain that government has become less institutionalized and that having fewer career politicians isn't a bad thing.

Effects on Southern Arizona

Two Southern Arizonans in leadership positions are termed out: Arzberger and state Senate President Tim Bee, a Tucson Republican running for Congress. So are two House committee chairpeople: Republicans Pete Hershberger, who is looking to move up to the state Senate, and Marian McClure. Republican Jennifer Burns, the only other Tucson-area committee chief, is not running for re-election, citing frustration with the job's \$24,000-a-year salary.

The departures mean there will be no Southern Arizona lawmaker who has experience being a state legislator going back further than 2000.

But even some of those who have survived by jumping between House and Senate said term limits have so altered the climate of the state Capitol — less civility, more partisanship, a rush by rookies to build up accomplishments — that it's no longer worth the fight.

"When you're only here eight years, it becomes dog eat dog," said state Rep. Pete Rios, a Pinal County Democrat who has served almost continuously since 1983. "If you want to move up into a leadership position, you don't care who you run over, because you only have a very specific block of time to do it in."

Rios, currently in the House after serving 15 years in the Senate, is voluntarily opting out of re-election this year to run for Pinal County supervisor. His daughter, Rebecca Rios, now holds his old seat in the Senate. Like her father, she's a Democrat.

"A lot of the camaraderie, a lot of the respect, collegiality has been lost because of term limits," Pete Rios said.

Arizona's term limits, approved by voters in 1992, originally were intended to target Congress — not state offices — as part of a national movement toward term limits.

But limits imposed on federal offices were later found to be unconstitutional, though they remain binding on the state level.

Switching back and forth

Like a few others, state Rep. Jack Brown has managed to get around them. The 79-year-old lawmaker, a St. Johns Democrat, served in the House from 1963 through the mid-1970s. He came back in the '80s, serving another 10 years, then went to the Senate from 1997 to 2004. He's been back in the House since.

"People have said I'm breaking the law, not legally but morally," said Brown, who has held numerous leadership posts. "I think I represent people in my district better than anyone else they could choose."

But Philip Blumel, president of the Virginia-based U.S. Term Limits group, said that despite complaints from politicians, term limits have brought government in Arizona and elsewhere back to the people.

"There are no politicians who like term limits; it's a restriction on them," Blumel said. "Term limits are not about getting rid of individual lawmakers. It's about changing the institution to have more regular, competitive elections."

Blumel said complaints about increased partisanship due to the limits are bogus. "Partisanship is not new," he said. And while lobbyists may hold much of the institutional knowledge in a term-limit setting, bringing in new lawmakers cuts back on cronyism, he said.

One politician at the Capitol who has warmed up to the limits is Rep. Steve Farley, a Tucson Democrat who was elected in 2006.

"It means newer people like me can get to a higher position of leadership earlier," Farley said.

Others, however, say it means no continuity in leadership. And Bee, the Senate president, took a rare step in 2006, firing many of the Senate staff members because he said they had gained too much control of the system over the years.

• Contact reporter Daniel Scarpinato at 307-4339 or dscarpinato@azstarnet.com.

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.