



Research Report

Municipal Term Limits

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To: Councilmember Sawyer and Staff

Summary: This memorandum responds to your request for examples of municipal term limits. The memo and the accompanying spreadsheet provide examples of peer cities and includes separate pages listing peer cities with a strong mayor-council form of government, and those that operate as a consolidated city and county. The memo contains examples of language included in term limit proposals that relate to existing elected officials that would be affected by term limits

Cities with a Strong Mayor Form of Government

Staff identified several cities with a strong mayor form of government that have term limits for municipal elected officials. Included on the spreadsheet are 25 American cities with a strong mayor form of government. Of these New York, NY; Houston, TX; San Diego, CA; Jacksonville, FL; San Francisco, CA; Nashville, TN; Memphis, TN; Baltimore, MD; Colorado Springs, CO; and New Orleans, LA all have a term limit of two four-year terms for both the mayor and council members.

Additionally, Los Angeles, CA has a term limit of two four-year terms for the mayor but has a term limit of three four-year terms for city council members. Philadelphia, PA and Atlanta, GA each have a two four-year term limit for the mayor but do not have term limits for council.

Cities with Similar Population

Staff identified several cities with a similar population as Denver using U.S. Census 2022 estimates. Narrowing the population threshold to cities within 100,000 more or fewer residents of Denver, staff identified eleven peer cities with regards to population. San Francisco, CA; Nashville, TN; and Memphis, TN each have a term limit of two four-year terms for mayors and council members. El Paso, TX limits elected officials from serving more than ten years in their lifetime. Louisville, KY limits mayors to two four-year terms but does not limit council members. Las Vegas, NV limits the mayor and council members to three four-year terms.

Cities with Consolidated Cities and Counties

Staff identified ten American cities with a consolidated city and county form of government. New York, NY; Jacksonville, FL; San Francisco, CA; Nashville, TN; and New Orleans, LA each have term limits of two four-year terms for mayors and council members. Philadelphia, PA and Louisville, KY each have a two four-year term limit for the mayor but do not have term limits for council.

Notable Cities without Term Limits

Of note, staff identified several cities consistently identified as peer cities of Denver in other research that did not have term limits. Seattle, WA; Oklahoma City, OK; Washington, DC; Boston, MA; Portland, OR; and Detroit, MI are cities with a population within 100,000 that do not have term limits. Chicago, IL; Columbus, OH; Indianapolis, IN; Seattle, WA; Washington, DC; Boston, MA; Detroit, MI; Omaha, NE; Minneapolis, MN; St. Louis, MO; and Salt Lake City, UT all have a strong mayor form of government and do not have term limits. Additionally, Indianapolis, IN; Washington, DC; and St. Louis, MO all have a consolidated city and county form of government and do not have term limits.

Impact of Term Limits on Current Elected Officials

Many cities included language in their term limit proposal that addressed exempting current elected officials in office at the time of the ratification of term limit proposals.

San Francisco, CA: San Francisco's [Effective Term Limit Initiative](#), ratified by voters in 2018, contained the following language under the initiative's purpose statement "Allow current elected officials who have already served two terms, or who are currently serving their second term, to complete the current term of office and allow any person who previously served two terms, and who is elected to office on the date this measure is approved, to remain in office until a successor chosen at the next general municipal election takes office, in order to facilitate the transition to lifetime terms by balancing the will of the voters, as expressed in previous elections, with the immediate and pressing need for reform."

Baltimore, MD: Baltimore's [Question K](#), passed by voters in 2022, instituted a two four-year term limit. The ballot question included the language "This amendment would be effective beginning with persons elected in the 2024 Baltimore City Election."

San Diego, CA: San Diego's [Measure K](#), approved by voters in 2018, removed term limit language related to a serving in a "particular district" and made a blanket term limit of two four-year terms for council members regardless of district. The measure also contained language that grandfathered in current elected officials. An analysis by the San Diego City Attorney at the time stated "The Charter language to be amended was approved by voters in 1992. The Council placed this measure on the ballot. If the measure is approved, all candidates seeking Council seats in the November 6, 2018 Municipal General Election, and who are elected to those seats, would remain eligible to be sworn in and serve a four-year term that will begin in December 2018." Staff identified one member that was seeking election to a third term in the 2018 election.¹

¹ <https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/city-clerk/pdf/cd2results.pdf>