

Founding Amateurs?

Fed up with "professional politicians," many Americans say they want to go back to "citizen legislators" like the Founding Fathers. But it turns out the Founders were a pretty experienced bunch.

By Gordon S. Wood

It's an American tradition. We complain that our national leaders are out of touch, and that they've turned into "professional politicians" who no longer understand the needs of the folks back home.

In tough times like these, with unemployment high and a deadly war dragging on in Afghanistan, Americans are in a particularly sour mood. As Election Day approaches, that spells trouble for not only President Obama and his fellow Democrats, who control both houses of Congress, but also for incumbents of either party.



That's one reason the Tea Party—which isn't really a party, but a loose group of conservative Republicans—has attracted a great deal of attention with its anti-incumbent and anti-Washington messages. For some voters, the Tea Party's retro name and the Colonial outfits they sometimes wear recall a time when the nation wasn't being run by professional politicians—or so the argument goes.

Professor Gordon Wood of Brown University doesn't take issue in this essay with any Tea Party positions, but he does question how Tea Party members—and Americans in general—romanticize the Founding Fathers.

The American public is not pleased with Congress. One recent poll shows that less than a third of all voters are eager to support their representative in November's midterm elections. And President Obama's approval rating is hovering below 50 percent.

"I am not really happy right now with anybody," a woman from Decatur, Illinois, told a *Washington Post* reporter. As she considered the prospect of a government composed of fledgling lawmakers, she noted: "When the country was founded, those guys were all pretty new at it. How bad could it be?"

Actually, our Founders were not all that new at it: The men who led the Revolution and created our political institutions were very used to governing themselves. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, and John Adams were all members of their respective Colonial legislatures for years before the Declaration of Independence. In fact, these Revolutionaries drew upon a tradition of self-government that went back a century or more.

By the mid-18th century, roughly two out of three adult white male colonists could vote—the highest proportion of voters in the world. (Of course, women, slaves, and men without property could not vote.) By contrast, only about one in six adult males in England could vote for members of Parliament.

One explanation why the French Revolution, which started in 1789, spiraled out of control into violence and dictatorship and the American Revolution did not is that Americans were used to governing themselves and the French were not.

In 18th-century France no one voted; their legislature, the *Estates-General*, had not even met since 1614. The American Revolution occurred when it did because the British government in the 1760s and 1770s suddenly tried to interfere with the long tradition of American self-government. For example, the Quartering Acts of 1765 and 1774 required colonists to house British troops in their homes, and the Stamp Act of 1765 taxed newspapers and other documents.

A deep distrust of political power—especially executive power—had always been a part of this tradition of self-government. So when the newly independent Americans drew up their state constitutions in 1776, many states limited the number of terms their governors or state legislators could hold office. In Pennsylvania, state assemblymen were term-limited so they would "return to mix with the mass of the people and feel at their leisure the effects of the laws which they have made."

But in the following decade, people began to have second thoughts. Many of the state legislatures were turning over roughly 50 percent of their membership annually and passing a flood of poorly written and unjust legislation. Stability and experience seemed to be what was most needed, so term limits were abolished in some places.

Too Powerful a President?

In 1787, the new federal Constitution, itself a reaction to the excessive populism of 1776, also did away with term limits, much to the chagrin of Thomas Jefferson and others uneasy over the extraordinary power of the presidency.

Jefferson thought that without term limits, the President would always be re-elected and thus would serve for life. When he became President he stepped down after two terms, affirming the precedent that Washington had established when he stepped down after his second term. (After Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to four consecutive terms starting in 1932, Washington's precedent became law with the ratification in 1951 of the 22nd Amendment, which limits Presidents to two terms in office.)

Although federal term limits have been confined to the presidency, term limits are now common at the state and local level. Indeed, Americans' traditional fear of entrenched and far-removed political power, as the current anti-incumbency and anti-Washington mood suggests, remains very much alive.

Yet precisely because Americans are such a rambunctious and democratic people, as the Framers of 1787 appreciated, we have learned that a government of rotating amateurs cannot maintain the steadiness and continuity that our country requires.

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