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# Governing Controversies: A View from the Ohio Public

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## **Governing Controversies:**

### **A View from the Ohio Public**

*Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics*

*University of Akron*

#### **Executive Summary**

This report updates Ohioans' views on four controversies concerning state government: legislative redistricting, early voting, term limits, and length of a single legislative term. To one degree or another, these "governing controversies" reflect a tension between the role of popular opinion and professional opinion in the operation of state government, especially the state legislature. These issues may be addressed by the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission, currently convened to study and propose possible changes to the state constitution (<http://www.ocmc.ohio.gov/ocmc/home>).

Key findings include:

- Most Ohio registered voters are dissatisfied with the current process for legislative redistricting. A plurality favors a non-partisan panel for redistricting, but a majority would accept a bipartisan board for redistricting. In contrast, a majority is satisfied with the current process of early voting.
- Most Ohio voters are satisfied with the current eight-year term limit for state legislators. However, a majority would accept extending the limit to twelve years. At the same time, a majority approves increasing the length of a single legislative term to four years for state representatives and six years for state senators.
- Ohioans' views on these issues have changed little in the last decade, suggesting that these opinions are rooted more in voters' values than in experience of the political process.
- There is potential public support for a combination of changes. For example, support for expanding term limits increases if paired with lengthening legislative terms or redistricting reform.

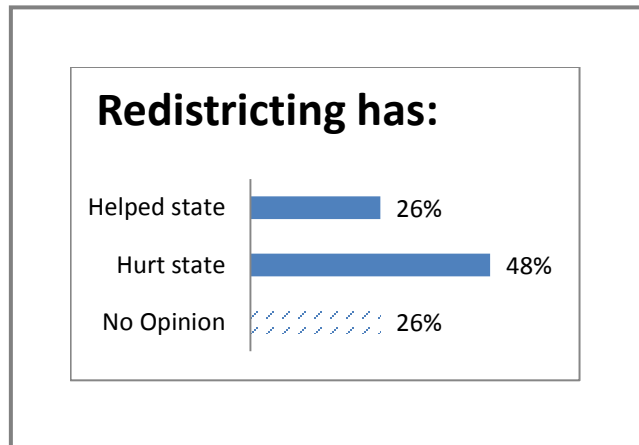
#### **THE STUDY**

This report is based on the 2014 Akron Buckeye Poll, conducted by the Center for Marketing and Opinion Research for the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at The University of Akron in April 2014. The survey was a random sample of 1,078 registered voters in Ohio, including both landline and cell phone components, with a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points. The 2014 results are comparable to previous Akron Buckeye polls conducted in 2005 and 2007.

## LEGISLATIVE REDISTRICTING

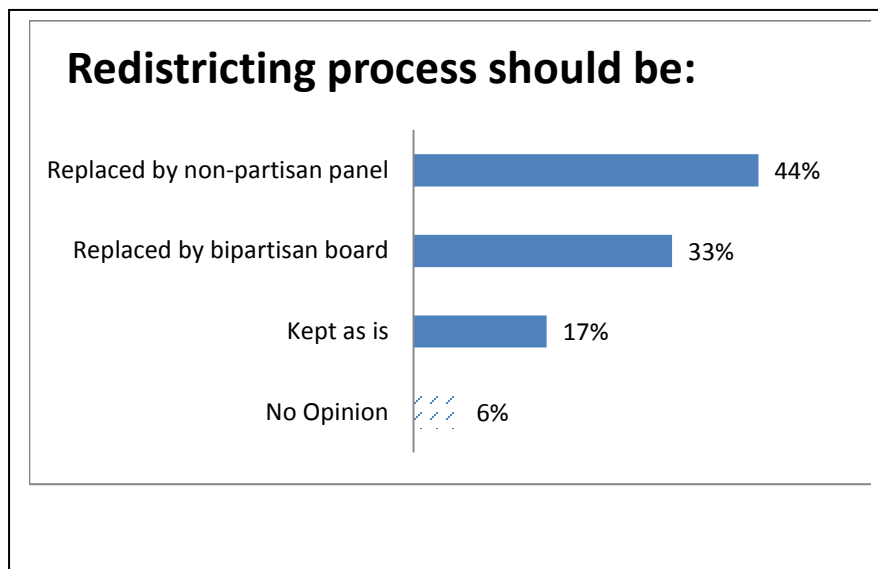
The redrawing of state legislative districts is a long-standing controversy in Ohio. In April 2014, two-fifths (43%) of Ohio registered voters report having recently heard or read something about the current redistricting process (*“districts drawn by a board of elected officials, controlled by either the Democrats or the Republicans”*).

Overall, almost one-half (48%) of respondents say that the current process for redrawing legislative districts has produced “poor government in Ohio and hurt the state.” Another one-quarter (26%) say that the redistricting process has produced “good government in Ohio and helped the state.” (Twenty-six percent of respondents have no opinion on the redistricting process in Ohio).



In 2014, Democrats and Liberals were modestly more dissatisfied with the current redistricting process, while Republicans and conservatives were modestly more satisfied. However, Tea Party backers were evenly divided in their views of redistricting. Older, better educated, and more affluent voters were the most dissatisfied with the current process.

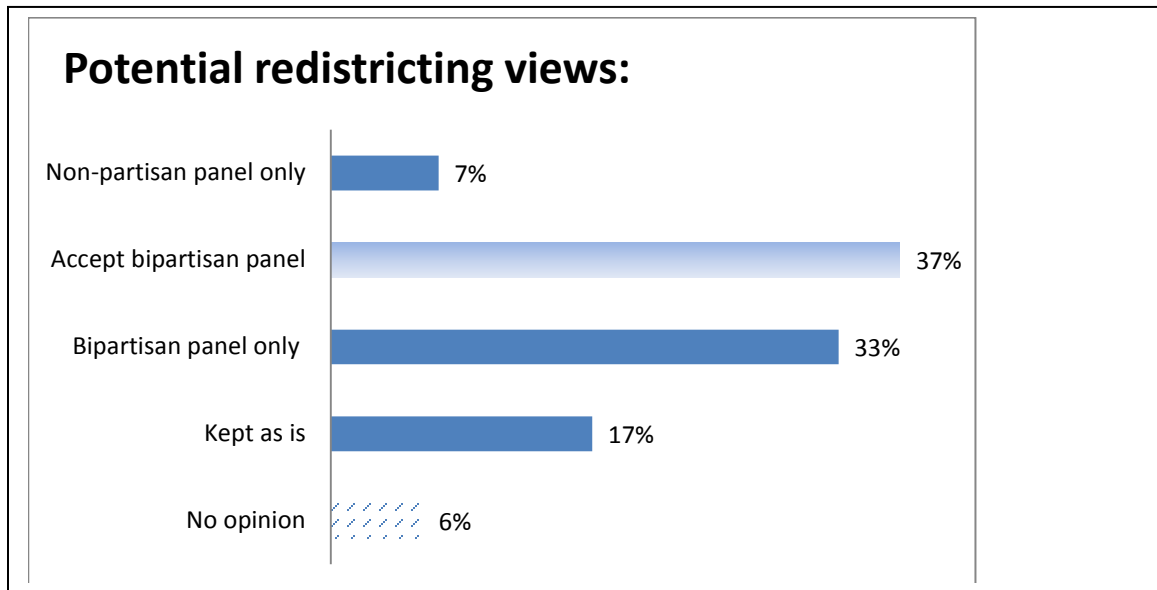
When asked what should be done about redistricting, more than two-fifths (44%) of Ohio registered voters prefer replacing the current process with “a panel of non-partisan experts.” Another one-third (33%) of respondents prefer “an appointed board with an equal number of Republicans and Democrats.” And one-sixth (17%) want to keep the current redistricting process. (Six percent have no opinion on what to do about redistricting in Ohio.)



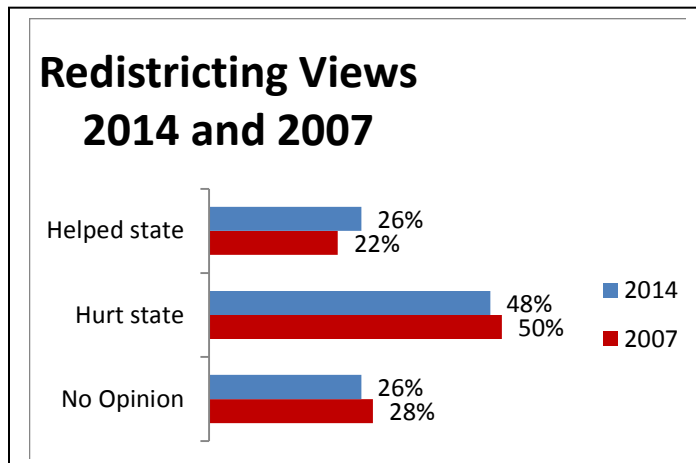
It is worth noting that Ohio voters rejected ballot proposals to create a non-partisan redistricting process in 2005 and 2012, in part because of the complexity of the proposals.

Despite respondents' initial preferences on redistricting, there is potential support for a bipartisan board: among respondents whose first choice was a non-partisan or partisan panel, four-fifths (86%) say that a bipartisan board would be acceptable to them.

When the acceptability of a bipartisan panel is taken into account, almost three-quarters (70%) of respondents express potential support for such a change (33% whose first choice was a bipartisan board, plus 37% who would accept a bipartisan board even though it was not their initial preference).



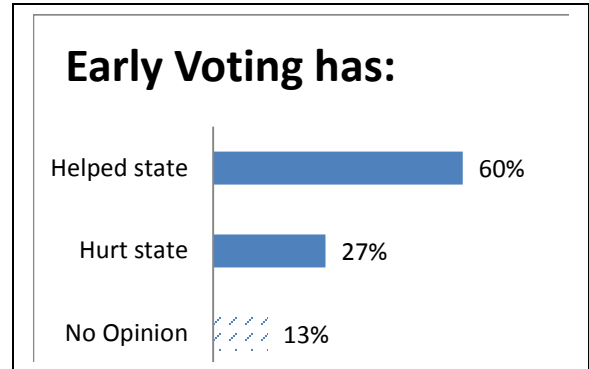
Public opinion on redistricting has changed only modestly in recent years. A 2007 Akron Buckeye Poll found that half (50%) of Ohio registered voters said redistricting had “produced poor government and hurt the state.” At that time, more than two-fifths (45%) favored a non-partisan panel over the alternatives. As in 2014, a large majority was willing to accept a bipartisan board.



## EARLY VOTING

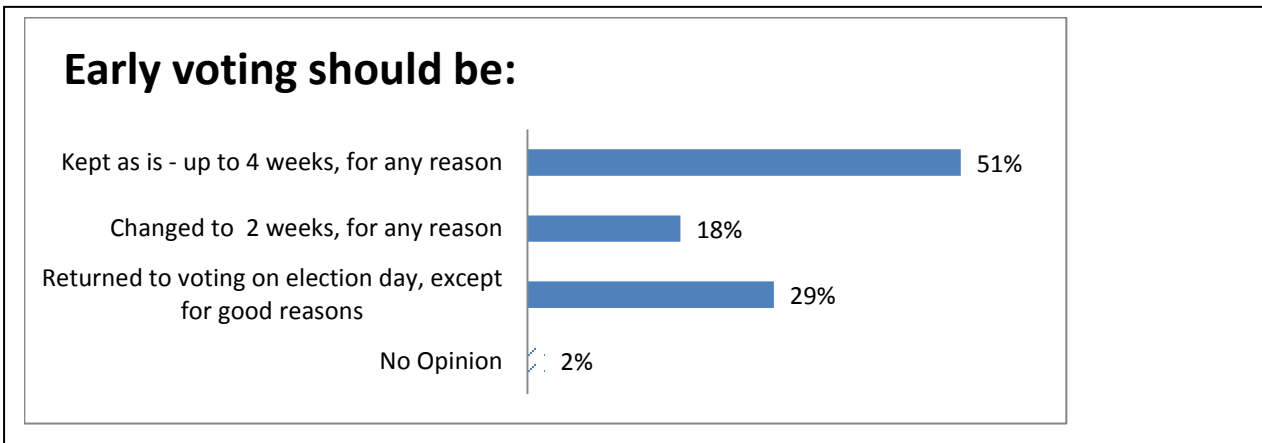
A more recent controversy in Ohio is early voting. In April 2014, three-quarters (74%) of Ohio registered voters report having recently heard or read something about the current process for early voting (“*vote up to four weeks before election day by requesting an absentee ballot for any reason*”).

In contrast to the current redistricting process, three-fifths (60%) of Ohio registered voters say that the current early voting process has produced “good government in Ohio and helped the state.” A little more than one-quarter (27%) of respondents say early voting has produced “poor government in Ohio and hurt the state.” (Thirteen percent have no opinion about early voting in Ohio.)\*



Democrats and liberals were more satisfied with the current early voting process than Republicans, conservatives and tea party backers. Younger, black and better-educated voters were also more satisfied with the current system.

When asked what should be done about early voting, one-half (51%) of Ohio registered voters prefer keeping the current four-week period before Election Day. Another one-sixth (18%) of respondents prefer a two-week period for early voting. And almost three-in-ten (29%) prefer voting to occur on Election Day, except for illness or other good excuses. (Two percent have no opinion on early voting in Ohio.)



\* There are other controversies associated with early voting, such as voter identification requirements and when in-person early voting is allowed. Pre-tests of this survey question suggest that a small portion of Ohio registered voters may prefer an early voting period longer than four weeks.

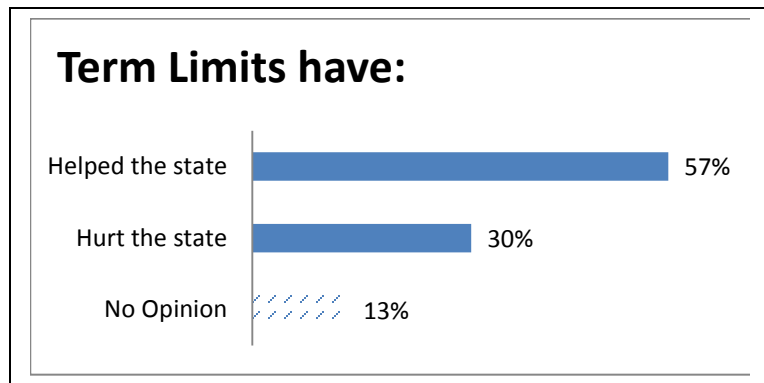
Public opinion on early voting appears to have changed little in recent times. A 2005 Akron Buckeye Poll found that three-fifths (62%) of Ohio registered voters supported early voting, while more than one-third (35%) opposed it. (Three percent had no opinion on early voting).<sup>†</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that Ohio voters rejected a constitutional amendment creating another version of early voting in 2005. Ohio’s current “no-fault absentee voting” was instituted by statute in 2006.

## LEGISLATIVE TERM LIMITS

Limits on the terms of state legislators have been a controversy in Ohio since 1992, when the state constitution was amended to institute limits. In April 2014, two-fifths percent (39%) of Ohio registered voters report having heard or read something about the current limits in Ohio (*“a maximum of eight consecutive years as a state senator or representative, with no overall limit on service in the legislature.”*).

More than one-half (57%) of Ohio registered voters say that current term limits have produced “good government in Ohio and helped the state.” In contrast, three-in-ten (30%) say that term limits have produced “poor government in Ohio and hurt the state.” (Thirteen percent have no opinion on term limits in Ohio.)

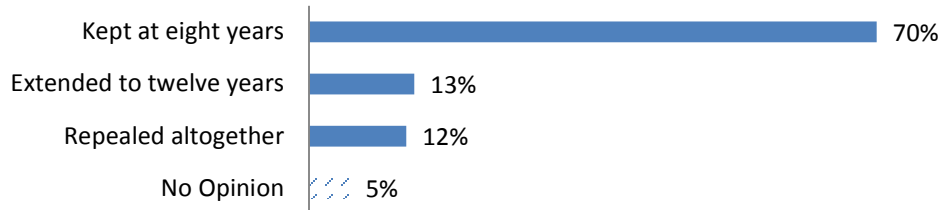


Democrats and liberals were modestly more dissatisfied with current term limits, while Republicans, conservatives, and Tea Party backers were modestly more satisfied. Better-educated and white voters were more dissatisfied with the current limits.

When asked what should be done about term limits, seven-in-ten (70%) of Ohio registered voters prefer the current eight-year limits. Another one-eighth (13%) of respondents prefer increasing the term to twelve years, and another one-eighth (12%) want to repeal term limits altogether. (Five percent have no opinion on term limits in Ohio.)

<sup>†</sup> The question wording in 2005 was different than in 2014: “Early voting is a good idea because it will increase voting” OR “Early voting is a bad idea because it will increase voter fraud.”

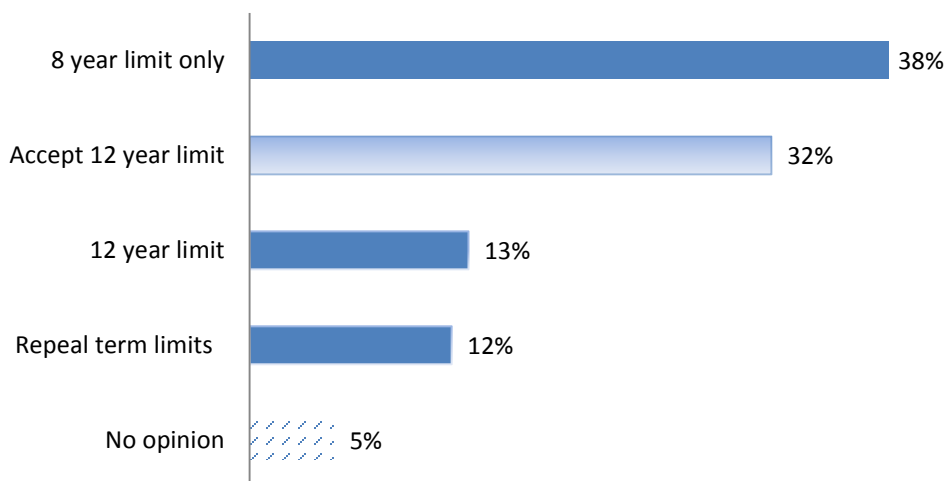
## Term Limits should be:



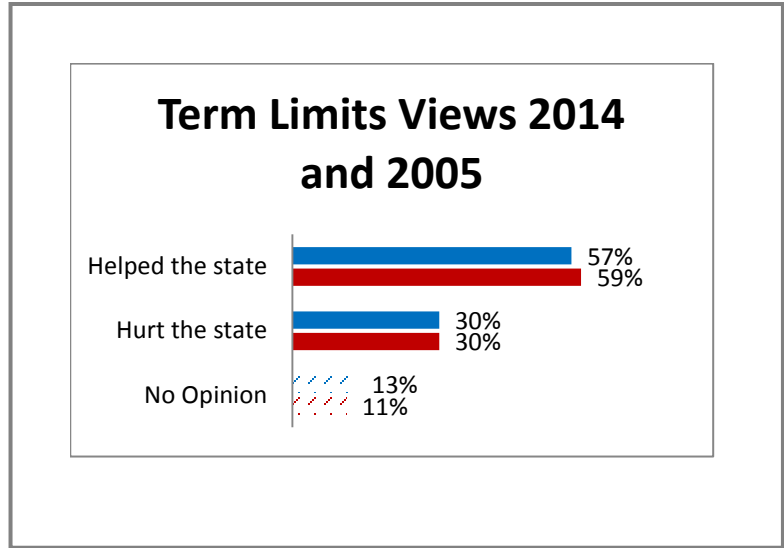
Ohio registered voters report potential public support for extending term limits to twelve-years: among respondents whose first choice was the current eight-year limit, more than two-fifths (45% or 31% of the total sample) say that a twelve-year term limit is acceptable to them.

When the acceptability of a twelve-year limit is taken into account, more than one-half (57%) of respondents express potential support for expanding term limits (13% whose first choice was 12 years; 12% whose first choice was repealing term limits altogether, plus 32% who would accept a 12-year limit although it was not their initial preference).

## Potential views on term limits

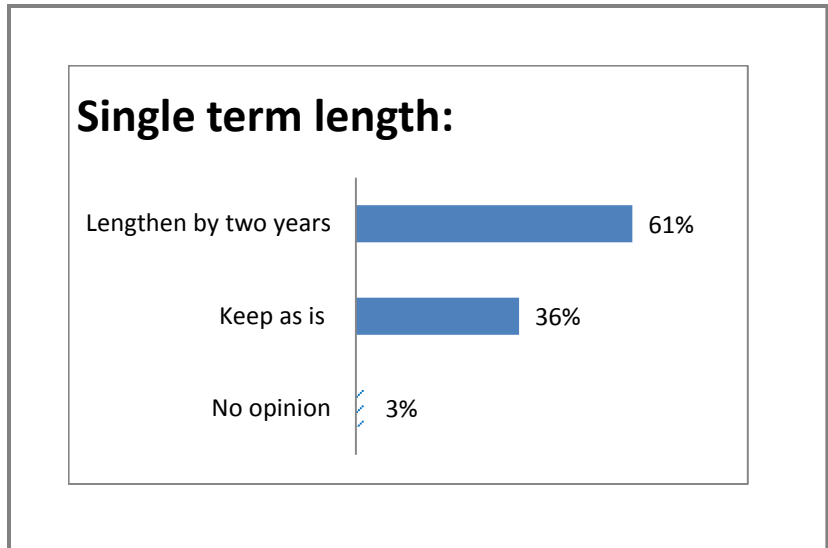


Public opinion on term limits has changed only slightly in recent times. A 2005 Akron Buckeye Poll found that three-fifths (59%) of Ohio registered voters said term limits had produced good government and helped the state, while three-in-ten (30%) said term limits had produced poor government and hurt the state. (Thirteen percent had no opinion on term limits.) Potential support for extending term limits to twelve-years has also increased modestly since 2005, when 27 percent of registered voters said a twelve-year limit was acceptable (compared to 32% in 2014).



**LENGTH OF LEGISLATIVE TERMS**

The length of a single legislative term has not been widely discussed in recent times, but there is a long history of debate over the number of years legislators should serve between elections. Three-fifths (61%) of Ohio registered voters support increasing the length of a single legislative term by two years for both state representatives (from two to four years) and state senators (from four to six years). Meanwhile, more than one-third (36%) oppose such a change.



(Three percent have no opinion on the length of a single term in Ohio.)

There were no significant political differences on increasing the length of a single legislative term. However, women, less well educated and less affluent voters were more supportive of the change.

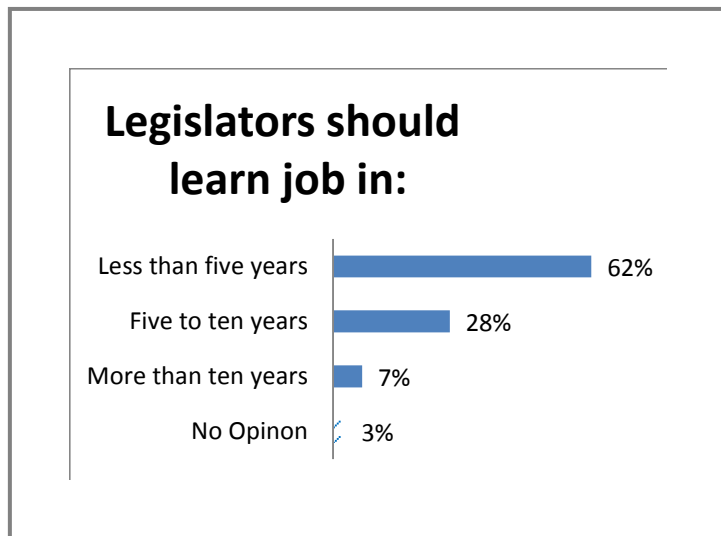
Thus more Ohio registered voters approve of longer terms (61%) than are satisfied with the current eight-year limit on service in the legislature (57%). However, respondents who support extending term



limits (78%) and those who say a twelve-year term is acceptable (74%) are more likely to back lengthening single terms than those who are committed to the current eight-year limit (46%).

Although these views may seem contradictory, there is a logical connection between lengthening and limiting terms. Ohio registered voters appear to want legislators to have more time on the task of legislating between elections, but also an overall restriction on a legislator’s continuous service in the legislature.<sup>‡</sup>

Evidence of this connection can be seen in respondents’ perception of how many years it should take for a state legislator to learn enough to do the job well. Three-fifths (62%) of Ohio registered voters say that it should take less than five years for a legislator to learn the job and more than one-quarter (28%) say it should take between 5 and 10 years. Less than one-tenth (7%) say it should take eleven years or more to learn the job. (Three percent have no opinion on how long it should take for Ohio legislators to learn the job.)



Finally, linkage among reform proposals potentially increases public support for change. For example, registered voters’ potential support for 12-year term limits increases if paired with lengthening single terms by two years (61% say they would support an increase in term limits). Potential support of 12-year terms limits also increased when paired with creating a bipartisan redistricting board (54% say they would support an increase in term limits).

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<sup>‡</sup> Given the negativity of election campaigns, it may be that Ohioans would prefer more years between elections.