

Alaska Group Seeks Initiative to Limit Congressional Terms

By Ian Mader

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ANCHORAGE (AP) - A voters group on Tuesday applied for petitions for a statewide initiative to limit the terms of Alaska's congressional delegation.

The application would need to be certified by Lt. Gov. Jack Coghill, and then nearly 20,000 voter signatures collected statewide before January to put the issue on the November 1994 ballot. It would need to be approved by a majority of Alaska voters.

Under the wording of the initiative sought, it would take effect only if a similar initiative is approved in a majority of states. Fifteen states have passed one in the past year.

Critics of such initiatives argue a state's influence in Congress would be crippled if terms of their senators and representatives are limited, as the most desirable committee assignments and chairmanships are based on seniority.

They say the only suitable way to impose term limits is through an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would extend limits to every state.

The initiative sought by Alaska's Committee for a Citizen Congress would limit senators to two terms, or 12 years, and representatives to three terms, or six years. The group submitted 100 signatures and \$100 on Tuesday to apply for the petitions.

Spokesman Bill O'Brien, an Anchorage engineer, said the group wants to break the cycle of incumbents getting reelected and end entrenchment of lawmakers in committee chairmanships.

"You have a system in Congress based on seniority, not merit," he said. "There's also a tremendous advantage that the incumbent has over any challenger. It's not what you'd call an even playing field - they can stay in office literally for decades."

O'Brien, a registered Republican, said the group is nonpartisan and includes Democrats, Republicans, Alaskan Independents, Libertarians and supporters of Ross Perot.

Ed Priola of U.S. Term Limits, a Washington, D.C.-based umbrella organization for initiative drives in various states, was in Alaska the last week of June and gave radio interviews to drum up support for the drive.

"We've got a 98.6 retention rate in Congress, and we want to return it to a citizen legislature like we had in the 18th and 19th centuries. They had a 50 percent retention rate," Priola said in a interview from Washington.

"We need people from all walks, not just the political ruling class that never lives under the laws they pass for other people."

Public disgust with perceived congressional abuse, such as last year's scandal involving representatives bouncing checks at the House bank, have helped fuel the nationwide movement, Priola said.

The group thinks getting 26 states to limit terms of the congressional delegation is a suitable target, and that other states will follow suit when that occurs, he said.

Members of Alaska's congressional delegation, all Republicans, said they could only support a drive that would seek to have all states limit their terms at the same time. All have served for more time than the limits sought by the group.

"It's such a monumental change, and in order to do it, you have to do it completely," Sen. Frank Murkowski said. "All states have to do it, otherwise we'd be left in a hodgepodge of seniority issues."

Mitch Rose, an aide to Sen. Ted Stevens, said the senator supported a constitutional amendment on the issue. That would take a two-thirds vote of both houses, and approval by three-fourths of the nation's state legislatures.

Rose said if 26 states impose the limits, others may choose not to in order to wield more power.

"If, say, California doesn't approve the term limits, they have 52 House members, and they're going to be running things, and Alaska congressmen aren't even going to be allowed in the bathrooms."