Most Americans are unhappy with their current political system, which includes many entrenched incumbent politicians who seem out of touch, hold extreme views, and face little serious electoral competition. Term limits are a popular solution to this problem, suggesting that incumbent politicians with establishment advantages serve as a barrier to more effective, pluralistic candidates. They argue political incentives corrupt sitting politicians, incentivizing them to pander to what voters think they prefer rather than what will make voters better off to secure their reelection. For example, an incumbent politician could pander to voters by favoring policies with immediate, visible benefits—like direct cash assistance—as opposed to policies that have long-term but less immediately visible benefits—like environmental regulation. On the other hand, if an elected official is term-limited, she has less incentive to impress the voters. Compared to the scenario where she is seeking reelection, a term-limited incumbent will likely not work as hard, be more likely to engage in corruption, and be more likely to implement the policies that she likes as opposed to the policies that the voters like. Additionally, outlawing the incumbent as an option eliminates the candidate voters determined to be the best from multiple elections as an option.

On net, theory and evidence from researchers suggest that term limits would likely reduce the quality and competence of elected officials while also reducing their incentives to work hard on behalf of voters. In U.S. state legislatures, comparing the same elected official when they are or are not term-limited, it was found that when legislators are term-limited, they sponsor fewer bills, are less productive on committees, and are absent for more floor votes. Further research has estimated that state legislative term limits increase polarization between elected officials. Other research suggests that term limits hinder economic prosperity, as well as causing legislators to lose influence relative to staff, bureaucrats, and governors and to become less professional, less innovative, and less specialized. To respond to concerns about counterproductive electoral incentives and poorly performing institutions, there are likely better solutions and reforms that do not sacrifice the desirable aspects of electoral accountability (including policy solutions in campaign finance, ballot access, and term limits for leadership positions).