MIAMI TODAY

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Term limits for commission a bad idea that already failed

Lurking on a daunting Nov. 6 ballot is a deceptively simple 29-word call to limit service on the Miami-Dade County Commission to eight years.

Michael Lewis

By the time you work your way that far down – past the presidency, US Senate, US House, state senate and house, then beyond a county commission race and on some ballots local questions, then through 12 proposed state constitutional amendments and a school bond plan – only then, when most of us have passed democracy overload and reached the I-don't-know-or-care state of mush, will you come to seven proposals to alter the county's constitution, its charter.

Because you'll be tired, you'll be tempted to knee-jerk a "yes" to term limits down on line 224.

You shouldn't. Line 225 – "no" to term limits – is far better policy.

Term limits are legal. The state supreme court ruled May 10 that Florida's 20 counties that have a charter may limit commission terms.

Ten of the 20 now do so. The ballot question could make us number 11. But just because it's legal doesn't make it right.

We say that even though term limits would eventually oust those commissioners who saddled us with nearly $3 billion in debt for a baseball stadium and seem oblivious to vital issues for Miami-Dade's future as they debate which lobbyists' clients should win lucrative contracts.

We've often said that we favor change for some commission seats. But forcing out every commissioner willy-nilly via term limits wouldn't be smart.

We tried it 20 years ago in Tallahassee, where term limits turned Florida into a revolving door with little institutional memory on the legislative floor and handed far more power to lobbyists who remain to tell officials what to do long after term limits force legislators out.

Florida legislators today expend so much energy seeking rapid rise to powerful posts that lawmaking itself gets far too little attention.

Few insiders would tell you that the Florida Legislature is as strong after term limits as it was before, when some legislators productively used knowledge amassed over the years in key areas such as education, environment and transportation.

Likewise, few insiders would tell you that Miami-Dade's commission is as strong as it was 20 years ago, either. Blame than on a shift to district election from countywide. Were present commissioners chosen countywide, even the most parochial of them would better serve us.

Allowing commissioners to hold office for years would be balanced if capable challengers could seek a fulltime job paying more than the present shameful $6,000 a year, a job few can afford to hold.

Commissioners now are shortsighted about the county's largest concerns and opportunities because all their votes come from their home district. Whether they serve only one term or 100, outcomes won't change. Term limits aren't a solution.

Higher pay and countywide election would help. Term limits, however, would over time wipe out institutional memory and put lobbyists more firmly in the driver's seat.

A surefire way to oust commissioners, of course, is simply to vote them out.

If you believe, correctly, that this won't happen to the most parochial of them because they diligently serve their districts to the detriment of the county as a whole, work toward charter change to revert to the system in which commissioners were drawn from districts but faced electors countywide, which minimized parochialism and produced a far better crop of officeholders.

By the time you reach the ballot's line 224 and election overload sets in, you'll be tempted by a simplistic answer to a complex problem: term limit the people we have, knowing that they'll get only eight years in office after current terms end.

Unintended consequences of that, however, would be worse. It's appealing to throw out the bums, but term limits throw out good and bad alike. Keep the option to retain commissioners who serve you well.

Besides, you'll have to keep your mind sharp in the voting booth down through line 243 to decide whether Miami-Dade should go beyond US foreign policy and bar county contactors from any business deals in certain nations. The ballot harbors more than one dangerous idea.