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Managing Vermont's Fiscal Condition: Four-Year Term for Governor

Public Finance Study Series

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In the 1991 legislative session, the Vermont Senate voted by a two-thirds majority to amend the state Constitution to provide four-year terms for governor. The vote was the first of four steps required to amend Vermont's Constitution. The final step would be a statewide referendum on the issues to be held in November 1994.

Vermont, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island now share the distinction of being the last three states to have two-year terms for their governors. The Vermont Business Roundtable believes it is time for Vermont to join the other 47 states with four-year gubernatorial terms.

Most states originally established two-year terms for governors although some, including Vermont, began with one-year terms. In 1870, Vermont amended its Constitution to allow two-year terms.

During post-Civil War Reconstruction, many southern states wrote new constitutions specifying four-year gubernatorial terms. Beginning in the 1950s, many states in the Northeast, Midwest, and West also adopted four-year terms.

In the early 1970s, the Vermont General Assembly approved four-year terms for governor, but in the General Election in November 1974, the voters rejected the proposed constitutional amendment.

Why Change the Term of Office?

There are four compelling reasons for electing governors to four-year terms instead of two-year terms:

- 1.** Longer terms allow better financial management; an executive can plan spending and revenue needs consistent with actual economic cycles, which are generally longer than two years. Vermont's wide swings between surplus and deficit are evidence of the problem inherent in fiscal policy that is based on the crisis of the moment.
- 2.** Longer terms allow the governor to offer more policy and planning initiatives since ideas and innovations are judged on longer experience. With two-year terms, a governor's program must prove itself in a very short time period, which tends to make executives very cautious.
- 3.** Four-year terms encourage capable people to enter government service. Citizens who are not interested in

political office and who do not want a career in government may be willing to make a public service commitment if they believe they have enough time to make a substantial difference. However, a two-year term is often not long enough to make significant contributions or changes in large bureaucracies. Consequently, men and women in the private sector often are reluctant to accept government appointments for challenging tasks that could be accomplished in four years but that cannot be completed in a two-year term.

4. Finally, we should give governors four-year terms because Vermont simply has too many elections. Campaigning is virtually nonstop; office-holders spend too much time politicking and voters are exhausted into apathy by the unending election process.

Amending Vermont's Constitution

Amending the Vermont constitution is a complex process. For a constitutional amendment to be approved it must:

- 1.** Receive two-thirds super-majority vote in the Senate. (The four-year term amendment received a super-majority vote during the 1991-92 biennium.)
- 2.** Receive a simple majority vote in the House. (This was not voted on during the 1991 session, but is slated for the 1992 session.)
- 3.** Receive a simple majority vote of both the Senate and House (in the 1993 and 1994 biennium).
- 4.** Receive a majority of votes cast in the next General Election (November 1994).

Passage of this amendment will depend on the efforts of its proponents to convince members of the Legislature and citizens throughout the state of the importance of this change.

The Vermont Business Roundtable believes that a four-year term for the governor of Vermont would provide better financial management for the state, offer an opportunity for improved planning, encourage more qualified people to enter public service, and reduce the time and money spent on non-stop campaigning.