



345 West 44th Street
New York, NY 10036

www.Manzano.org

212-707-8778 t.
212-707-8121 f.

Gary Tilzer
Press Contact
MANZANO 2005

Tel: 212-707-8778

E-mail: Press@Manzano.org

Web: www.Manzano.org

Article Printed In *The Clinton Chronicle*
2004 July Issue

Break Down The Walls

By Carlos Manzano

In 1996, a referendum was placed before the voters. The referendum's backers—a host of locally elected officials whose jobs were in jeopardy—sought to overturn the 1993 law term-limiting municipal offices—Mayor, Comptroller, Public Advocate, Borough Presidents and City Council. Their efforts failed miserably. Voters overwhelmingly reaffirmed their desire to limit their local officials to two-year terms. This came against the dire warnings of politicians, some of whom cited December 31, 2001, the day when most of them would be turned out of office, as a potential doomsday where the city would stop running because it was believed that, in the words of former Councilwoman Annette Robinson, "Government will be thrown in to chaos."

In April 1995, in supporting the term-limits established two years prior, the Black Political Convention in New York City pointed out that there were large increases in the number of candidates for public office in cities where limits were implemented. Many of these fresh political faces were women and minorities. Not only did cities with term limits not plunge in to chaos, they were energized by an infusion of local talent.

More than ten years have passed since the original approval of New York City term-limits and, as we approach the 2005 election cycle, we are beginning to see the second round of its effects. Diverse citizen-candidates from the city's many communities are considering running for public office. I am one of those citizen-candidates, having launched my campaign as a Democratic candidate for Manhattan Borough President (www.manzano.org). I wouldn't have had the opportunity to run for Borough President if we still lived in a city without term limits and where the vast majority of well-funded and connected incumbents were elected and reelected in perpetuity. I believe term-limits are necessary to foster change not only within the city, but also for the emergence of new leaders and ideas within the Democratic Party, of which I am proudly a part.

Looking at our state government in Albany, by comparison, where the members of the Assembly, Senate, and the Governor are not term-limited, gridlock is the order of the day. The state budget has not been approved and the politics of not passing it—as well as other needed legislation—has become a triangular finger-pointing blame game.

Our city government has never been perfect and probably never will be. But we can be proud that it continues to change and evolve, aided -- no doubt -- by term limits. Still, there remain many voters and civic groups who oppose the current term limits law. It is not difficult to understand the concerns of those citizens who are reluctant to see well-liked and effective politicians forced out of office.

We could, however, as voters, reach a compromise on the issue by extending the law to a three-term limit instead of the existing two. This would mean that municipal office holders could serve twelve years instead of eight, allowing more time for elected officials to truly integrate into their communities and build the sort of base that is necessary to affect positive change on local issues.

Extending the number of terms a politician can serve will not satisfy everyone. Limits will still appear egregious to those who argue that, as a democracy, we should simply leave the electoral process alone. To those who view politics and politicians as necessary evils, no amount of limits will ever be satisfactory. The proper way to discuss the issue and create a compromise is to conduct public hearings and, eventually, to introduce a new referendum to amend the existing law.

We should not stop with term limits, however. Another measure that must be adopted is to discontinue the practice of allowing our party officials to hold posts as publicly elected politicians and vice versa. Party offices such as District Leaders and State and County Committee Leaders are elected, volunteer positions within the parties. Public officials are elected to office by voters and paid a salary to serve in the Council, the Assembly, the Senate, and other areas.

Too often, party officials will also be elected public office holders. It is simply impossible to provide solid and strong local, grassroots leadership when legislators have to be in Albany or Washington, D.C. for three or four days a week, far from the people they represent. Those we send away from the city to serve our interests should remain focused on their work in the governmental bodies to which we elect them. Those who work in local party posts—on whom those same officials depend to keep them up-to-date on local developments—should be in the city conducting their valuable work. These distinctions should be clear and the roles filled individually.

This situation, largely hidden from the average voter, can only be changed from within the Democratic Party, and with the urging and support of Democratic voters.

These positions will, no doubt, be unpopular with many Democratic officials, who would prefer that no limits exist, but it is time to break down the walls and consider the reforms mentioned above. The growing disconnect with the youngest voting generation only grows stronger as disenchantment with the process rises. The defection of Democrats to the Republican Party, particularly in the Latino community, is a reality, and the rejection of any party affiliation whatsoever by those registered to vote in New York has greatly increased. It is our current and dysfunctional state of affairs which leads to voter cynicism and apathy.

When voters in 1993 approved term limits, they spoke with a voice that said, “enough is enough.” A constantly evolving, fresh look at our political process could be a renewed opportunity for an energized electorate. The reforms mentioned above would be a welcome step toward realizing those opportunities.

Carlos Manzano
Candidate For Manhattan Borough President
www.Manzano.org