

J. J. Kilpatrick

Six Years Is Too Long for A Poor President

Washington

IN A RADIO address last month dealing with reform of federal election laws, President Nixon touched lightly on two heavyweight proposals for changing the structure of our government.

By implication, he appeared to support the view of "many political scientists" that a President should be elected for a single, non-renewable six-year term. He also recalled that he himself long had favored four-year terms for members of the House, "with half of the members elected every two years." He suggested that his proposed 17-member Commission on Federal Election Reform consider the propositions.



James J. Kilpatrick

These are old proposals, many times considered, and as many times rejected. Throughout most of the Convention of 1787, the delegates appeared wedded to the idea of a President, chosen by Congress, for a non-renewable term of seven years. It wasn't until the last two weeks of the convention that a four-year term, without limitation, was agreed to.

The idea of a single six-year term was briefly revived 25 years ago, in debates on the 22nd Amendment, but talk faded when agreement was reached on a two-term limitation. Political scientists still may think highly of the six-year plan, but no popular support can be discerned. The objection is well taken, it seems to me, that six years is too long for a poor President, while eight years is enough for even a good one.

MR. Nixon's second proposal, that members of the House be named for four-year terms, has a good deal more in its favor. The idea gathered momentum after the Civil War and in 1906 won ringing endorsement from the House Judiciary Committee before the resolution was defeated on the floor. Again in 1923, a similar amendment got out of committee. Lyndon Johnson strongly endorsed the plan in 1966. Now Mr. Nixon has revived the debate.

The arguments, pro and con, have changed little through the years.

Proponents of a four-year term observe that the work of the House has increased greatly, both in complexity and in volume, since the two-year term was fixed in 1787. It is contended that it takes longer for a congressman to master the issues before him. In sharply contested districts, it is urged, a member of the House serves for his first year and campaigns — expensively — in his second. If the entire House were elected to coincide with a President's term, the incoming President presumably would have a better chance of getting his program through.

One more advantage was expressed vividly by the House committee in 1923: "With an election every two years the political grafter who thrives on partisan strife and on the nervous uncertainty controlling candidates for office is able to live from one election to another by the boodle secured at his unholy business. The adoption of the proposed amendment would render it less possible for this creature to ply his trade."

OPPONENTS OF THE four-year term, in my own view, have the better case. It is unclear, under the Nixon proposal, how districts would be divided in the first instance, so that half the seats might be filled in 1976, the other half in 1978.

Apparently the plan would give us a four-year Congress instead of a two-year Congress, and it might make the House, like the Senate, a "continuing body."

The most serious objection, by conservative political philosophers since George Mason, is that four-year terms would deny the people the power of reasonably swift response to public events. Mason's idea was for "frequent, certain, and regular elections," and the two-year limitation serves to keep a Member close to his district.

IF THE PROPOSED study commission gets into this area, it might consider another hoary idea — the idea of periodic ineligibility. Mason felt that legislators could best be restrained from oppression "by feeling and participating the Burthens of the People," and he urged that "they should, at fixed Periods, be reduced to a private Station, and return into that Body from which they were originally taken."

The idea of limiting Senators to, say, three terms, and members of the House to nine, would set off a howl, but it might make sense.

Washington Star Syndicate