

Requirements for federal office

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Age minimums in our Constitution

When our Constitution was written 223 years ago the average life expectancy in the U.S. was 39 years. Ben Franklin was a grand old man of 81 when he signed the Constitution, but he was the rarity. Alexander Hamilton a brilliant and exceptionally experienced man of 32 at the signing, was killed at 49. Even the master dealmaker James Madison was only 36. Thus, while cognizant of the need for mature and seasoned adults as lawmakers, the authors of the Constitution were well aware that any age limits must be low to permit a wide selection of candidates.

They therefore specified few, fairly low age minimums in the Constitution.

- Persons elected to the House of Representatives must be at least 25 years and have been a citizen for 7 years.ⁱ
- Candidates for the Senate must be at least 30 and have been citizens for at least 9 years.ⁱⁱ
- The President and Vice President must be at least 35 and be natural born citizens of our country.ⁱⁱⁱ

In those years, many people fully entered the adult workforce before they were teenagers. Thus the variety of life experiences at 25, 30, or 35 would be greater than those of young folks today with current extended periods of formal schooling.

2010 life expectancies are twice those at the time of the founders. Higher ages for our national elected office holders could appropriately be considered.

Age, maturity, variety of life experiences

Political maturity certainly does not automatically come with age. We all know individuals of great age who have less appreciation for the possibilities and difficulties of life than some 18 year olds do. Never the less, there is a certain seasoning that comes only after one has experienced a wide variety of tasks, problems, and solutions over the course of a longer life.

I think it appropriate to update age limits to take advantage of the much greater life spans that Americans now enjoy. A person in the 1790s had a very narrow window of opportunity to run for high office; fourteen years for the House, nine years for the Senate and 4 years for the presidency certainly limited the percentage of the population qualified to run. Mathematically we could add 39 years to each limit and still have many more citizens available as potential candidates in 2010.

A new proposal

I propose:

- 1) A very modest jump in the minimum ages,
- 2) A small increase in length of citizenship,
- 3) A new requirement for non-governmental work experience, or military service.

The requirement for non-governmental experience or active military service would disqualify some modern candidates. Most citizens cannot easily relate to someone who has spent their entire working life in government service. The exception for active military service is an attempt to honor that service and also to recognize the special knowledge of our world these people bring to public office.

Fortunately we still subscribe (at least in rhetoric) to the most moral economic system ever used by any country. Experience in private, profit-making business is quite valuable in relating to the responsibilities of regular citizens. Only experience in private business is likely to develop skills in working with a tremendous variety of people and focusing on service to the customer.

No limits on the ages of Supreme Court Justices are currently present. This gives Presidents a strong incentive to appoint the youngest justice with appropriate qualifications. The amendment below limits this to the senior and hopefully more experienced judges.

One suggestion:

Amendment Number _____

The age minimums for candidates to the House, Senate and the presidency are hereby changed to 40, 45, and 50 years, respectively. The minimum age for a Supreme Court Justice shall be 50 years.

**The Citizenship requirements for the House and Senate are changed to 15 and 20 years, respectively.
The President and Supreme Court Justices shall be natural born citizens.**

Candidates for the House, Senate and Presidency shall show 10, 12 and 15 years respectively of gainful employment in a non-governmental profit recording business or may substitute active service in the nations armed forces on a year-by-year basis.

Each State's election agency shall assure compliance with these requirements before placing the candidates or declared electors names on the ballot.

There is currently controversy about who is responsible for enforcing compliance with constitutional rules for federal offices. The last sentence assigns this responsibility to the state election officers who will in the end be responsible for the honest conduct of the elections.

ⁱ **The Constitution of the United States of America, Article I, Section 2.**

ⁱⁱ **Ibid, Article I, Section 3.**

ⁱⁱⁱ **Ibid, Article II, Section 1.**