Term limits on presidents are a good thing. Here's why.

By Stephen Kaufman

The concept of "president-for-life" appeals to some people. But for most of us, term limits are a welcome check on authority.

President Obama likely will hear some supporters chant "Four more years!" at upcoming political events. But he won't take it seriously.

U.S. presidents haven't had the option to serve a third term since 1951. Even before that, most followed the example set by George Washington and never tried to stay in office for more than eight years.

South Africa's Nelson Mandela famously kept his promise to serve only one term, despite public pressure to change his mind.

Some argue that term limits violate the will of voters who support their current leader and want the leader to continue, even if that would mean revising their country's constitution. However, history has shown that term limits strengthen democratic institutions over the long term and help ensure peaceful political transition.

Because of term limits:
Incumbents are less able to use the state's institutions to manipulate elections or erode the power of rival branches of government and political adversaries.
Leaders feel more pressure to deliver results and leave office with a positive legacy.
Individuals, no matter how powerful and popular, cannot become indispensable.
Political transitions are normal, regular, predictable events, so rival parties have little incentive to upset the system through coups or other means.
The need to change leadership encourages a rising generation of political leaders, fresh ideas and possible policy changes.

It sounds like a paradox, but even as term limits prevent a popular president from remaining in office, they promote the healthy competition needed to strengthen democratic institutions and the democratic process.

You can learn more about democratic institutions and the electoral process with the YALI Network's three-part online course Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility. Take all three lessons, pass the quiz and earn a free YALI Network certificate.

It Started with a Challenge: One Month, 1,000 Trees

Greenpop's Urban Greening Programme plants thousands of seedlings every year at schools in the Cape Flats area of Cape Town, South Africa. (Courtesy of Greenpop)

Misha Teasdale logged a lot of air travel working in documentary films.

But the travel didn't square with his concern for the environment. Back at home in Cape Town, South Africa, he always recycled, rode his bike instead of hopping in his car and tried to be what he calls "a conscious consumer" — someone who considers the ethics behind the products he buys.

So a few years ago, after traveling 360,000 kilometers through 12 countries for a film, he calculated the environmental cost of the jet fuel. His calculations told him he'd have to plant around 600 trees. He rounded-up to 1,000 and recruited friends to give him two months of their time to help him plant. "I love convincing people to do things they generally wouldn't want to do," he said. Once they begin, they realize it's more fun and easier than they had thought.

Teasdale's idea started small, but with an effective plan for how to spread the word.

Greenpophold’s annual Reforest Fest to help return the Platbos Forest, Africa’s southernmost indigenous forest, to prosperity. (Courtesy of Jacques Smith)

In the first month, he and his partners worked to raise money and awareness for the project they called Greenpop. They sold cards with seeds at busy traffic intersections that said “Join the treevolution.” They got the word out with “reverse graffiti” projects (text and art created by cleaning dirty urban surfaces). They rode through rush-hour traffic on skateboards and scooters wearing superhero capes. They attracted the attention of companies as far away as Norway and the U.S., and global corporations such as DHL funded seedlings and provided employee volunteers.

In the second month, they planted trees, learning as they went. The first five trees — in Masiphumelele in the Western Cape — took four and a half hours to plant. By month’s end, they could plant 300 trees in five hours.

The project attracted so much interest that they had 800 trees beyond the initial goal of 1,000, and other groups were eager to get involved. It was supposed to be a short campaign, Teasdale said. “We were going to plant a thousand trees then go back to our day jobs.”

Instead, they moved forward with Greenpop. Corporate sponsors began paying for the trees and the planters’ expenses. In the five years since starting, Greenpop has planted more than 57,000 trees at schools, hospitals, community centers and other urban sites as well as in forests and on farms across South Africa, Zambia and Tanzania.

A food forest in Livingstone, Zambia, highlighted during the Zambia Festival of Action 2015 (Courtesy of Marike Herselman)

Some companies working with Greenpop pledge to tie their production to tree plantings. For every so many products sold, companies pledge to plant a tree. Greenpop sends the GPS coordinates where trees are planted, so they can map them. Some companies display a certificate saying how many thousands of trees they have planted. “It’s a nice tangible thing for a company to be able to say,” Teasdale said.

Greenpop has become involved in reforestation efforts in Zambia and Tanzania and has “a database of projects across the continent,” according to Teasdale. This July, Greenpop will host its fifth annual Zambia Festival of Action. The event is modeled on large music festivals but focused on ecological education. “I want to change the culture around environmentalism,” said Teasdale. “It’s not just about trees, it’s about connecting people.”

Can Greenpop help you connect people in your country? How many trees could you and your network plant at a YALI event? You can find out how to get involved at Greenpop’s website.

The early stages of this world-changing project sometimes felt like struggling in the dirt to get the first of a thousand trees planted. What did Teasdale learn from those early setbacks?

“If you want to see your projects rise and do amazing things, it’s important to look at the most efficient ways of getting things done” and focus on those, said Teasdale. “It’s important to have reflective time that allows you to see where you had the most impact and where you didn’t have much impact. It’s very easy to have a hundred ideas, but it doesn’t mean those hundred ideas are going to be good for you or bring the right audience to you or be the most sustainable options for you.”

Is your election free and fair? Consider this …

By Stephen Kaufman

(Shutterstock)

Your country's election or referendum is meaningless if you and your fellow voters don't believe it is legitimate. If you have good reasons to think your vote isn't being counted, the contest is rigged toward a certain party or candidate, or the process favors certain voters over others, why would you accept the outcome?

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, has worked in more than 135 countries since 1987 — including more than 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa — to increase the legitimacy of electoral processes. It cites Article 21 from the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the basic framework and rights that

every election should follow:

“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

This helps explain why there are election monitors, laws that protect the voting rights of women and minorities, and the need for independent news coverage throughout the process.

As you ask yourself the following questions, remember voting is only one part of a citizen’s responsibilities. Stay engaged, because elected officials need to be held accountable!

(State Dept. / Jamie McCann)

A Public Servant Campaigns to Serve

Allison Silberberg is the mayor of Alexandria, Virginia.

Drawing the line that connects wanting to change your community for the better and actually making that change is a difficult task. “Since I was a kid, I was taught about doing what we can for the public good, and I was really interested in public service,” said Allison Silberberg, formerly vice mayor and now the mayor of Alexandria, Virginia, a city of 150,000 just across the Potomac River from Washington.

Silberberg has worked in community leadership and public service for over 25 years, including eight

years on her city's Economic Opportunity Commission.

YALI Network members will know Silberberg from her YALI Network Online Course, "Strengthening Public Sector Service," in which she discusses topics such as being an effective public servant and establishing professional ethics. In the last year, Silberberg got to live those principles in both her campaign and her election. She started as mayor on January 1, 2016.

In the primary to determine who would run as her party's representative in the general election, Silberberg defeated two opponents, one of them the incumbent mayor, who had served four terms. Her victory came down to 300 votes. In November, she won the mayorship with 63 percent of the vote.

"It was a very old-fashioned, grass-roots campaign," she said. She is proud that her staff was entirely made up of volunteers. "We stood at farmers markets. I went to as many events as I could. People hosted me in their homes, which was lovely." She spent nearly every night of the campaign season at meet-and-greets. Not all of them were well attended, but Silberberg feels the face-to-face nature made a difference. "It might seem like small potatoes to be talking to 10 people or fewer," she said. "Well, all those people go out and they [tell other people]. They ask questions, and there's no one standing between me and the people. I have no idea what they're going to ask me. It was all very unrehearsed and real."

Among the issues that appear to have attracted voters was Silberberg's insistence that officials not be allowed to vote on proposed development projects if they had received campaign donations from the developers of those projects. She has promised that her first action as mayor will be to set up an ethics commission to advise the city council on such conflicts of interest.

Silberberg remembers, from when she was 7 years old, her mother asking her what she wanted to be when she grew up. "I was sitting there with my after-school snack and my dog at the kitchen table. I said, 'I think if someone needs glasses because they can't see at school or a coat because they're cold, it would be really great to be helpful to them."

In university, Silberberg was an intern for Massachusetts Senator Edward M. Kennedy. "He was very inspiring," Silberberg remembered. "There was a great sense of mission in his office every day when I arrived. And I thought, 'I want to have that sense of mission in my life!'"

The Promise of Ecotourism

The author teaches a class of secondary-school students about environment conservation at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Isiolo County, Kenya. (Courtesy of KEEN)

This guest blog post is by Jonathan Odongo, Founder & Executive Director, Kenya Environmental Education Network.

Tourism plays a major role in economic growth for countries with wildlife and scenic landscapes. In Kenya, tourism contributes significantly to economic growth, surpassed only by agriculture. Sadly, both tourism and agriculture are very vulnerable to climate change. If action is not taken in time, drought, floods, diseases and other climate change–related disasters will kill both sectors and ultimately Kenya's economy.

During our *Ecotourism and Field Studies* excursions, we witness firsthand the ravaging impacts of climate change: the melting snows of Mount Kenya; the dying Yala swamp; the receding Lake Victoria; increased prevalence of malaria; the rapidly declining populations of lions, Grévy's zebras and ostriches in the African savannah; and submerging islands along the coast, among other degraded lands and lost ecosystems.

The tourism sector is partly responsible for climate change because of the emission of greenhouse gases caused by the burning of fossil fuels during travel and the destruction of forests for luxurious tourist hotels that rely on unsustainable energy. Often tourism also generates waste that ends up in landfills and pollutes oceans with water-related tourist activities.

However, there is a solution: *Ecotourism*.

Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.

Ecotourism offers a perfect opportunity to create environmental awareness, change people's attitudes toward the environment, educate and sensitize people about *environmental* issues like climate change, and inspire them to take action.

Students at Rugusu Spring in Isiolo County, Kenya, learn about protection of water catchment areas and the importance of forests. (Courtesy of KEEN)

Some of the lessons relevant to climate change mitigation and adaptation in the tourism sector we share with learners and clients in the field include:

1. *Energy conservation*: Adopting clean energy in tourist facilities — for example, solar, biogas and energy-saving stoves for cooking, lighting and warming bath water — and switching off lights when not in use help to mitigate climate change.

2. *Waste management*: Kitchens and restaurants generate a lot of waste. Such waste in landfills generates the greenhouse gases responsible for global warming. Organic waste can be converted to compost or used in biogas digesters to generate energy.

3. *Sustainable agriculture*: Kitchen gardens next to tourist facilities can absorb composted kitchen waste, supply vegetables and promote organic farming.

4. *Water conservation*: Closing taps when not in use and installation of press-only taps help minimize waste of water. Water harvesting and storage should be a priority.

5. *Protection and management of water catchment areas*: Using forests and wetlands, through tree

planting, reforestation and rehabilitation, helps ensure water availability as well as increases absorption and storage of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

6. *Poverty reduction*: To curb poverty-induced activities such as charcoal burning and deforestation, proceeds from tourism should be invested in community development.

7. *Respect for indigenous cultures*: Some traditional beliefs and practices such as totemism contribute toward protection of nature, for example indigenous tree species that play an important role in overall carbon sequestration.

8. *Sustainable land use practices*: Promote agroforestry and reliance on nonwood forest products such as honey, fruits, fibres, resins, gums and essential oils control loss of forest cover.

9. *Pollution*: Use of sustainable transport curbs emission of greenhouse gases during transportation of tourists.

These practices can be replicated at home, school and other areas. Ecotourism can therefore be a solution to climate change and a dozen other environmental challenges.

Lifestyles of the Famous and Green

Celebrity watching takes on a whole new meaning when it gives us regular people ideas for how to do our part to reduce climate change. Celebrities such as Harrison Ford (above), who has worked with Conservation International and other environmental groups for 25 years, use their star power to bring attention to climate change.
You can bet these entertainers have the means to drive big polluting cars and leave the lights on all

night, but instead they're promoting green living.

Brad Pitt

(Flickr/Richard Masoner)

When not making blockbuster movies, the world-famous actor, through his Make It Right Foundation, has donated green building materials to replace homes in New Orleans that were destroyed in Hurricane Katrina.
In his daily life, Pitt is an enthusiastic cyclist, climbing on a bike to get around town instead of calling a limo.

Cate Blanchett

(© AP Images)

The actress is the driving force behind Australia's second-largest solar array (above), which is on top of the Sydney Theatre Company.
Blanchett is also a passionate recycler. "It makes me furious when you're in the line in the supermarket and people just put everything into new plastic bags," Blanchett told USA Today. "I very self-righteously pull my crumpled plastic bags out, you know."

Don Cheadle

(Courtesy of "Years of Living Dangerously")

"What is more important than food and clean air? We need a big push," says Cheadle. Nominated for an Academy Award for his role in Hotel Rwanda and known for his roles in Iron Man movies and Ocean's Eleven, he serves as an ambassador for the United Nations Environment Programme. "I hope to use my celebrity to motivate people and contribute to moving our global society back from the brink," Cheadle told makers of the climate-change documentary series Years of Living Dangerously.

Leonardo DiCaprio

(©AP Images)

He started the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation in 2006, which is “dedicated to the long-term health and well-being of all Earth’s inhabitants,” and in December 2015 addressed a gathering of mayors and local leaders during the COP21 summit in Paris on the importance of acting on climate change. DiCaprio’s commitment to everyday green living includes owning only one car — okay, that might only be impressive among the rich and famous, but the car is a high-mileage, gas-electric hybrid.

Angelique Kidjo

(Richard Pierce)

Grammy Award–winning singer Angelique Kidjo recently attended the COP21 climate summit and described an upsetting reminder of the present-day effects of climate change from her native Benin. “I went in December, expecting to have some certain type of fruit and food, and my mom was like, ‘We don’t find that anymore.’ … Some spinaches are no longer there. Some species of fish are not there. And I’m like, ‘What is going on?’”

Sting

(©AP Images)

Rock legend Sting has a long history of environmental activism, mostly focusing on deforestation in the Amazon rain forest. “All of us could stop traveling tomorrow, industry could stop tomorrow,” he told the Guardian, “but the largest contribution to global warming is deforestation — by a huge, huge amount.”

Rich or poor, famous or not, everyone on the planet should be taking steps to live in an environmentally responsible way. Learn more about how your country can move forward on climate change and what you can do.

#YALILearns: Air Conditioning, Aerosols and Agriculture

Participants at the December 17 #YALILearns event in Ibadan, Nigeria (Courtesy of Okunlola Festus)

With #YALIGoesGreen, more than 9,000 YALI Network members across Africa have committed to taking action on climate change and earned their certificate in the “Understanding Climate Change” course.

More than 300 members have told us about the climate events they’ve held in their respective

countries. We want to share with you some of the great feedback we're getting about these #YALILearns events by taking a look at specific events over the next few weeks.

On December 17, Okunlola Festus and Ogunwole Omotola, two Network members in Ibadan, Nigeria, training with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, worked with GreenWealth Agripreneurs, the institute's agribusiness initiative, to invite institute participants to an event centered around the climate-change course.

Although they were unable to stream the course video, they used the transcript and discussion guide from the "Resources" tab of each lesson to design a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation on climate change science and solutions was followed by a wide-ranging discussion. "When the participants discussed how they contribute to climate change, they were all shocked that by spraying things like perfume or deodorant, they were contributing to climate change," Festus said. "The majority of them committed to using deodorants and perfumes without the harmful aerosols."

They also discussed what roles they could take in their communities to curtail the unsafe dumping of hazardous waste. The topic of how excessive use of air conditioning harms the climate led to a Facebook chat on the topic following the event.

Festus said he would encourage YALI Network members planning an event to be ready to be open-minded and to incorporate the views of participants as the discussion evolves. "You have to allow every participant to be involved in the discussion — carry everyone along."

If you want to hold a #YALILearns event of your own, look at the #YALILearns page to learn more about how to facilitate your event and choose a topic that will most benefit your audience. Local partners such as a university or civic group can be helpful in finding a venue for your event and helping you get the word out.
Make sure to take pictures at your event, then let us know how it went at the #YALILearns feedback page so we can share it with the Network!

YALI Network 2015: What a Year It's Been!

President Obama greets

2015 Mandela Washington Fellows at the Presidential Summit. (State Dept./D.A. Peterson)

Before the YALI Network says goodbye to 2015, let's cast a glance back to see the distance we've traveled in the last 12 months. Our voice grew louder and stronger, adding almost 100,000 members and making us over 200,000 strong.

Here are five YALI Network highlights from 2015 we're excited about:

1) YALI Network Online Courses: Some of the biggest news from the YALI Network's 2015 was the continued growth of the free YALI Network Online Courses and the launch of #YALILearns, the initiative that encourages Network members to share knowledge and learning in their communities and beyond. At the Mandela Washington Fellowship Town Hall, President Obama said, "Last year, I said we'd launch a new set of tools for our YALI Network. So today, we've got more than 30 online lessons available on everything from public speaking to how to write a business plan, mentoring, new ways to network across Africa, around the world, new training sessions, meetings with experts on how to launch a startup. And we're launching three new online Mandela Washington Fellowship Institute courses so that all members of the YALI Network can access some of the great ideas that you've been sharing." This year, 25,000 YALI Network members earned more than 50,000 certificates by completing online courses.

2) #Africa4Her: In March, more than a thousand YALI Network members from 47 countries pledged to work to increase girls' opportunities in the classroom and women's opportunities in the workplace, while countless others pledged through Twitter using #Africa4Girls, including first lady Michelle Obama.

People around the world are taking action to #LetGirlsLearn. Pledge to invest in women and girls

with #Africa4Her → http://t.co/DDUnhnTfAq

— The First Lady (@FLOTUS) March 16, 2015

3) #YALIGoesGreen: The end of 2015 saw the launch of #YALIGoesGreen, in which YALI Network members committed to taking action on climate change. More than 9,000 people took the first step and earned their certificate in "Understanding Climate Change." Then 300 more network members shared highlights from events in their countries to support efforts to address climate change, thereby earning a #YALIGoesGreen Green Champion certificate.

4) #YALIVotes: In a year of landmark elections in Nigeria and Burkina Faso, the YALI Network reached out to its members in nations with upcoming votes to find out how they planned to inspire their communities to ensure free, peaceful and fair elections.

With citizens of several countries — including Benin, Niger and Uganda — heading to the polls, we'll be encouraging Network members to post to Facebook and Twitter to share why they think voting and civic engagement are important, using the #YALIVotes hashtag.

YALI Network Members at a #YALILearns session on fundraising in Abuja, Nigeria. (Courtesy photo)

5) This year we introduced YALI Network Face2Face, a place for YALI Network members around Africa to share ideas and plan in-person meetups. So far, more than 4,000 of you have attended Face2Face events, with many more to come in the next year.

YALI Network members also shared their own experiences and insights on social media and through the YALI Network blog. These included an activist from Burkina Faso describing her country's struggle toward more open elections, the president of the African Green Movement explaining smart agriculture and how something as simple as banana stems can be used to mitigate the effects of climate change, a poet from South Africa sharing her pledge for #Africa4Her, a young scientist from Uganda checking in from the historic COP21 climate summit in Paris,and more.

We look forward to more robust engagement from the YALI Network in 2016 as our growing numbers increase our reach and our ability to foster positive change.

A Young African Leader's Perspective on COP 21

Peace visits COP21 exhibitions in Paris. (Photo courtesy Peace Sasha Musonge.)

Peace Sasha Musonge is a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow who attended the historic COP21 summit on climate change in Paris. During her Ph.D. study in biosciences, she has also attended the 2015 World Bank Group Youth Summit on climate change in Washington and debated the effects of climate change on the African continent on Voice of America's Straight Talk Africa.

In spite of the terror attacks that took place in Paris, I was not deterred from attending COP21. I went to Paris very charged and engaged since these were to be historic climate talks. Before the talks, INDCs were submitted by different member countries, showing a bottom-up and participatory approach. That meant that countries who pollute the most would map out a way to support the developing countries from continents such as Africa.

Arriving at Le Bourget in Paris at the start of the conference, I found a lot of liveliness and optimism in the Blue Zone, where country delegates, diplomats and scientists held discussions till late into the night. I met with some of the chief negotiators from East and Central Africa and got their view on the progress of the talks. Most of the negotiators were very optimistic that the outcome would favor climate adaptation in many African countries.

Peace Musonge stands outside a conference room at COP 21 named for environmentalist Wangari Maathai (Photo courtesy of Peace Musonge.)

As a young civic leader, I believe some of the most exciting engagement took place in the Green Zone here at COP21. I saw a lot of creativity and positive energy, especially from the youth groups in the Green Zone, where nongovernmental stakeholders, academics, civic organizations and business

communities highlighted their climate change–based activities.

During the past two weeks, I networked with passionate climate activists from different parts of the globe, from young children to adults. What struck me the most was the strong representation of high school and university groups, for example, the China Youth Climate Action Network. It was comforting to know that young Chinese students are taking climate activism seriously.

One of the biggest side events at COP21 was the Global Landscapes Forum, with many sub-Saharan youth in attendance. They showcased amazing landscapes initiatives. One young graduate started a fruit-tree-planting initiative to combat climate change and youth unemployment. During the Africa Land of Business event, I was able to network with fellow African climate activists. The discussion focused on the Mayombe forest — which is known as the Amazon of Africa and spans four countries (Angola, Congo, DRC and Gabon). I had the privilege of sharing my current research on "south-to-south" cooperation to combat climate change with the Angolan environment minister. We discussed the opportunities for future collaboration between indigenous communities, like the Mayombe forest inhabitants and communities in the Amazon in South America, who are both fighting for their rights.

The passion and drive reflected in the civic society arena demonstrated to me that communities are willing to combat climate change, and I hope that the different governments live up to the promises they have stipulated in their INDCs, especially when it comes to funding Africa's climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

I believe we should stop pointing fingers, since climate change has not been caused by a single factor, but by many different ones. As Africans, we should work collectively and strengthen and improve our climate and weather centers, especially in Dakar, Khartoum and Cape Town. As young people who make up over 80 percent of Africa's population, we are the generation who will face the effects of climate change in the coming years. We need to work in unity with both the public and private sector to promote green lifestyles and to leapfrog older technologies, as we did with the mobile phone revolution.

Act locally and think globally. Let's keep going green, and see you in Marrakech for COP22 in 2016!

The views and opinions expressed here belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the YALI Network or the U.S. government.

What Climate Change Means for African Women

According to the U.N., women in sub-Saharan Africa spend an average of 40 billion hours a year collecting water. (© AP Images)

In Tanzania, because of drought, a girl must walk farther for water than her mother did years before. The extra time means she can't go to school.
In Mozambique, flooding leaves standing water in which mosquitoes breed. A malaria outbreak follows, in a place where the disease had not been seen before. A mother is more vulnerable to the sickness at the same time she must care for her sick family.

Women in Sesheke, Zambia, receive mosquito nets to prevent the spread of malaria. (© AP Images)

These aren't imagined scenarios. They're outcomes of weather patterns associated with climate change. And the U.N. and the World Health Organization say those changes impact women more than men, especially in developing countries.

"The impact of climate change on women is huge," Priscilla Achakpa, executive director of the Women Environmental Programme, told Vogue Magazine of her home country of Nigeria. "The men are forced to migrate and they leave the women, who are now the caregivers because they find they cannot leave the children."

Women "are among the most vulnerable to climate change," concludes a U.N. Population Fund report, "partly because in many countries they make up the larger share of the agricultural workforce and partly because they tend to have access to fewer income-earning opportunities."

"In Kenya, where I work," said environmentalist and 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow Asha Shaaban, "women walk up to 10 kilometers in search of water. This is time taken that could be used for other things. They could use that time to take care of children or bring income to the household."

When combined with economic and social discrimination, climate change threatens women's rights to education, information, water, food, health care and freedom from violence, says Eleanor Blomstrom of the Women's Environment and Development Organization.

Blomstrom stresses the importance of involving women in the response to climate change — "from the local project level to the international policy level and everywhere in between. "At COP21 in Paris," she said, "the Women and Gender Constituency is showcasing solutions that are sustainable, women-led, safe, promote women's participation and do not increase potential for conflict."