

Tax Revolt: Politics Of Depression On A Dead-End Street

None of the currently popular analyses of the spring primaries and referendum returns in the U.S. comprehends the actual basis of the deep anger which observers see the U.S. electorate expressing. In particular, those pundits and politicians demagogically

DOMESTIC POLICY

reacting to the two to one victory of California's property tax reduction measure, Proposition 13, as a second American Revolution are as wildly out of touch with reality as those who see a "conservative tide" sweeping the nation.

In fact the "revolt" in American voting booths is a repudiation of the "post-industrial society" thesis and its inevitable result, a decline in general living standards, now perceived by broad sections of the electorate.

Traces of this were evident in recent Republican Party primary elections, for those who know how to read them. For example, California Attorney General Evelle Younger, generally considered a "moderate" Republican and identified in his campaign for the gubernatorial nomination as a strong proponent of nuclear power, beat a half-dozen other candidates, including several who made support for Proposition 13 the keystone of their campaigns. California Governor Jerry Brown has made opposition to nuclear power a primary feature of his term in office.

In New Jersey, the victory of Republican Jeffrey Bell, a former aide to Ronald Reagan, over incumbent Senator Clifford Case, was perhaps more attributable to Case's reliance on televised endorsements by "post-industrial" advocate Henry Kissinger and a subsequent small turnout of registered Republicans than to the appeal of tax-cut advocate Bell. The victory of well-publicized basketball star Bill Bradley in the Democratic Senatorial primary against the man fielded by the state party organization of Governor Brendan Byrne can similarly be traced to Byrne's identification with "fiscal austerity" politics.

Recent Gallup and Harris polls have shown that the majority of the electorate does not want the massive cuts in basic services of industrial society which so many have attempted to read into the Proposition 13 election returns. A Gallup Poll cited by New York's United Federation of Teachers chief Albert Shanker shows 83 percent of the population thinks that too little or barely enough is being spent on fire protection; 77 percent too little on libraries and sanitation services; 73 percent too little for parks and recreation; 59 percent too little on public hospitals; 63 percent too little on schools; and 47 percent who think public welfare programs should be maintained and improved. Similarly, the Harris Poll reported that even among voters backing Proposition 13, 60 percent would oppose such measures if it meant cuts in

education, police and fire protection, sanitation, and other infrastructural services.

Neither has the tax revolt rhetoric obscured the fact that in both major parties, it has been perceived that certain forces are bent on using the tax issue as an attack on the institution of government itself. Conservative Republicans are being advised by central policy coordinating mechanisms in the party to stick with the traditional party battlecry of less government spending, rather than promote "tax revolt" hysteria. Leading liberal Democratic spokesmen, including Sen. George McGovern, have strongly criticized those who say "that government cannot solve our problems...define our vision...eliminate poverty...or reduce inflation."

But the political maneuvering in both parties in response to Proposition 13 shows the present bankruptcy of traditional party political recipes in response to the economic crisis attendant upon the decline of American industrial strength.

Senator Ted Kennedy, billed by Americans for Democratic Action leader Joseph Rauh at an ADA conference addressed by McGovern as "the only hope" for liberals opposing Carter in 1980, told the National Conference of Mayors annual meeting in Atlanta last week that "Proposition 13 has awakened many in Washington, just as the farmers at Concord Bridge did 200 years ago when they fired the shot heard round the world. No person in public life — no president, secretary, governor or mayor — can ignore this message and the outraged feelings of the people...Those in leadership positions must cut where there is fat." Said one observer, "He sounded like George Wallace." Said another, "If Teddy's out to cut fat, he should rent a guillotine."

On the other hand, McGovern, Rauh and the ADA have been promoting labor-intensive jobs programs, which the Carter Administration is already committed to as the solution to declining living standards. At the mayors conference, Sam Brown, a one time leader of the "antiwar movement" and now chairman of Carter's ACTION volunteer environmentalist and community action apparatus, ordered participants to "think small," enlist volunteers, and "stop spending dollars and start spending more energies."

Vice-President Walter Mondale, speaking on behalf of President Carter, pointed to legislation for an "urban development bank" which would dole out \$2 billion for "private business" economic development in "targeted" urban areas on the labor-intensive model as the solution to the mayors' problems. Like Kennedy, he was coolly received.

Meanwhile, the Republicans, whose basic 1978 campaign documents promote a major military defense buildup and a three year, 30 percent corporate and income tax reduction simultaneously, are hardly more programmatically credible to the population.

— Don Baier