

In spite of the widespread ambiguity in the election returns, voters in 1990 did give political commentators something to ponder by clearly challenging several important pieces of conventional wisdom. One is that money talks. Taking advantage of voter frustration with a political process heavily financed by interest group money, some candidates successfully contrasted their relatively low-budget campaigns with those of opulently financed incumbents. In winning the Florida governorship, former Democratic Senator Lawton Chiles made a major point of limiting campaign contributions to \$100. In winning a Senate seat in Minnesota, Democrat Paul Wellstone toured the state in an old green school bus to underscore the fact that his campaign was financially strapped. Wellstone also ran clever TV ads, including one in which he rapidly spelled out his positions because, he explained, he lacked a multi-million dollar campaign chest that would have given him the luxury of talking more slowly.

There were scores of House contests where challengers were able to muster a respectable 40 to 45% of the vote, even though they had to run their campaigns on a financial shoestring. While few House incumbents were actually beaten, the 1990 results threw into doubt the conventional wisdom that House members have grown so secure they can only be ousted from office by an ethics scandal. Six of the seven House incumbents beaten in 1988 had been tarred by ethical questions. But in 1990 several House members with clean reputations were unexpectedly beaten as well. Doug Walgren of Pennsylvania and Robert W. Kastenmeier of Wisconsin, for example, were blindsided by energetic young Republican challengers who intimidated that the two veteran Democrats were congressional underachievers who had lost touch with their districts.

The 1990 results also showed some cracks in the two-party monopoly of the political process. Two well-known former Republicans, Walter J. Hickel in Alaska and Lowell P. Weicker Jr. in Connecticut, won governorships running as independents. In Vermont, a former socialist mayor of Burlington captured his state's lone House seat. And in many parts of the country, unofficial election-night returns showed the third-party vote inching upward from its level in recent elections.

An ambiguous election year, yes; a frustrating year, yes; a status quo year, to a large degree, yes. Yet voters in 1990 also challenged conventional wisdom in a way that suggests that 1992 could see sweeping electoral change.

*Rhodes Cook is senior writer,
Congressional Quarterly*

VOTERS CAUTIOUS ON CITIZEN INITIATIVES

By Thomas E. Cronin

Voters decided on 73 citizen-initiated state ballot issues in 1990; 65 of them were on the November ballot, while the other eight had appeared earlier on primary ballots in four states. This was the highest number of citizen-initiated measures since 1932, when 74 issues were on the ballot. But 1990 was also a record year, or near-record year, for *defeats* of initiated ballot issues. Preliminary analysis of voting returns suggests that more than three-fourths of all citizen-initiated measures were defeated in 1990, an increase of 15 to 20 percent in the negative response over recent years.

Term Limits Go 5 and 0

Voters in three states—Oklahoma, California and Colorado—approved term limits on state officials. These passed decisively in Oklahoma and Colorado, by nearly 70% votes of approval, and more narrowly in California. Voters in San Jose, California and Kansas City, Missouri approved similar term limits for their city officials. This amounted to an impressive win-loss record of 5-0 for term limits in 1990. And just as the controversial tax cut measure in California, Proposition 13 (approved in 1978), triggered similar cuts or spending caps in other states and, in the Reagan first term, nationally, so this year's term limits are likely to spread. Support for term limits for Congress was also given a major boost by these state and city ballot measure victories.

Taxing and Spending: Don't Increase...and Don't Cut

Several environmental measures, including the much publicized "Big-Green" issue in California, went down to defeat this year. Analysts in California note that it was the "big" and not the "green" aspects that made voters cautious. In general voters, no doubt worried about the pending recession and about increases in taxes, looked at environmental measures in terms of their costs. Voters in South Dakota, for example, decided against a measure which would have banned certain types of mining in the Black Hills region of their state; it would have meant a loss of jobs for many people in that region. In other tax-related action, Montanans defeated a 25 cent increase in cigarette taxes. Californians defeated similar ballot measures that would have increased taxes on alcoholic beverages.

At the same time, complicated tax limitation measures were on the ballot in several states, including Massachusetts, Colorado, Oregon, and South Dakota. Nearly all failed. One exception was in Oregon, where voters agreed

to limit school property tax assessments to \$15 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. Voters elsewhere were apparently convinced that the measures would jeopardize funds for schools and city and county governments, and the well-being of citizens in general. They didn't want existing services threatened.

Social Issues: Abortion; Marijuana; School Vouchers

Three abortion-related measures were on the ballot in Nevada and Oregon. The "pro-choice" side won in each case, reversing the trend in ballot issues in the late 1980s when several "pro-life" measures won approval.

Voters in Alaska approved a measure making even the smallest usage of marijuana a state crime. Maverick gubernatorial candidate in Alaska, Walter Hickel, backed the measure even though he is often known for his libertarian strain.

Oregon voters handily defeated a measure that would have permitted more "parental choice" in deciding on schools for their children. This so-called "voucher" plan would have granted \$2,500 in tax credits to families that choose to send children to private schools or educate them at home. Critics of this voucher plan said its passage would have severely undermined the funding for public schools by draining off nearly \$100 million for children already attending private schools.

Attitudes Toward Citizen Initiatives

What do voters think of the right to vote on issues put on the ballot through signature-petition campaigns? This right exists now in about half the states. There is a growing controversy in California about the number of measures on the ballot. Thirteen citizen-initiated ballot issues joined 15 other legislature-referred measures, mainly bond issues, for a total of 28 statewide propositions on California's November 6 ballot. Voters rejected 22 of the 28 measures. But even in California 66% of the voters said having the right to vote on such issues is "a good thing" according to the Field Poll. Only 8% of Californians thought it a bad thing, a proportion essentially unchanged since 1982.

In most other states, where typically only a handful of measures appear on the ballot, voters generally say they would like more not fewer issues on their ballots. Thus in Colorado this past fall, a statewide sample was queried: "...in almost every election voters in Colorado are asked to vote directly on various ballot issues. Some people say there are too many of these direct votes or referendums; others say they should have the opportunity to vote on even more issues. How do you feel? Are there too many referendums in Colorado or not enough?" Fifty-four

percent said not enough, 18% volunteered an unprompted response that there were the right number on the ballot nowadays, and 22% thought there were too many. Nearly three-fourths, then, were positive about the current number and, if anything, wanted more policy issues to vote on. Voters in South Dakota told pollsters there that, though they are sometimes confused by the issues they must vote on, they definitely want to have this right and view it as a reasonable way to make their laws.

Winners and Losers...

It's always difficult to categorize ballot measures in liberal-conservative terms. Yet a very rough analysis of voters' 1990 judgments suggests that, once again, both liberals and conservatives won a fair number of victories. Liberal-progressive forces defeated most of the harshest tax limit measures, defeated the voucher proposal in Oregon, and fought back at least three anti-abortion measures. Conservative and business interests were successful in defeating environmental restrictions, luxury excise tax increases, and a number of other measures that would have increased taxes. Conservative and liberal populists joined to approve term limits in three western states and these, plus the impressive number of defeats for tax and bond measures this past November, sent a strong anti-government and anti-politician message. The strength of these negative votes and the term limit victories (with a general support of 63%) were probably in part responses to worsening economic conditions, anxieties over the Middle East crisis, and the perceived failings of Congress and the Bush administration to balance the national budget. Whatever the reasons, ballot-issue voters were in a more negative mood than they usually are, and voted with extra caution when it came to their pocketbooks.

*Thomas Cronin is McHugh Professor of
American Institutions and Leadership at
The Colorado College*