

AMERICAN POLITICS AND CAMPAIGN '90: LOCAL CONDITIONS WILL DECIDE

By James A. Barnes

Most of the actors are in place, but it's still taking a long time for the curtain to go up on the 1990 elections. Uncertainty isn't unusual for off-year elections, which lack the focus of presidential contests, but it's especially prominent this year. Partly this is because the nation's attention has been directed overseas, with the Cold War ending and tensions exploding in the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, there will be elections on November 6. If they are going to produce significant partisan changes, it's hard to see what issues will be the cause. Even the much touted anti-incumbent disease is hard to detect.

As in 1986, the country is now going through a period of slow growth. But back then, the dominant economic landmarks were the booming "bi-coastal economy" and a troubled farm sector. This year, New Englanders are facing a downturn in the defense, real estate and financial sectors, and even Californians are beginning to feel a chill from a cooled-off housing market and military cuts which are producing layoffs at aerospace plants. Out in the heartland? It's not great news everywhere, but harvests in several states are setting records and land values are soaring. New anxieties, sure, but long festering regional problems aren't evident.

A Themeless Pudding

Voters are somewhat pessimistic this year, but there's no biting economic concern, like the recession of 1982, to galvanize resentment. Like others, this midterm election will to some extent be a referendum on the incumbent president — but this president is a hard target to draw a bead on. George Bush's tendency is to compromise with Congress on most issues. Absent confrontation, there are few differences either side can exploit. Bush has successfully vetoed a high number of bills (13) for this stage in his term, but not one of them, with the possible exception of family leave, will be even a mid-level campaign issue. The only memorable clash between Bush and Democratic congressional leaders on proposed legislation has been over a capital gains tax cut. Even this doesn't involve deeply held philosophical positions; many Democrats say they could accept a capital gains cut with certain conditions. Democrats themselves are sharply divided on the clean air and child care bills. Ironically, Republican Reps. Lynn Martin of Illinois and Bill Schuette of Michigan, both running for the Senate, and scores of GOP House candidates, are defining themselves by *opposing* Bush's decision to call for new taxes. All in all, neither party has been able to find a clear theme.

The Politics of Candor

The highlights of this campaign are more likely to center around individual stories. Three of the most interesting candidates are all running for governor: businessman Clayton W. Williams, Jr., the Republican nominee in Texas; former San Francisco mayor Dianne Feinstein, the Democrats' choice in California; and Boston University president John R. Silber, who is seeking the Democratic nomination in Massachusetts. Williams and Silber have that special penchant for the provocative statement that gives professional political handlers a stroke.

Even after earlier remarks had gotten them into hot water — like Williams's joking reference to rape, and Silber's proposal that welfare mothers who have a second child out of wedlock lose their benefits — both men are still at it. On gun control Williams recently said: "We may have to march on the government one day if it doesn't straighten out. We need to keep our guns." And Silber, whose controversial comments are known as "Silber shockers," recently expressed his views on health care rationing by paraphrasing from *King Lear*: "When you've had a long life and you're ripe, then it's time to go."

Feinstein, who might seem a bit regal, can be just as blunt. Describing her support for the death penalty she is more graphic than most campaign ads on the subject. Of a paroled murderer who subsequently committed a second capital offense, she said: "He stole a car with two 16-year-olds at a drive-in, eating hamburgers. Took them out, wanted to see what happened if you shot someone in the brain — this is by his own testimony. Shot them in the brain, ate their hamburgers and went out and committed a robbery. Well, I have no problem saying he abrogates his right to live." Listing her qualifications for a Supreme Court nominee, Feinstein said she wouldn't appoint anyone who wasn't pro-choice and pro-death penalty. Scholars might quibble that this standard limits the number of qualified judges to choose from — not many meet both tests — but Feinstein's position is probably quite popular among Californians.

The three above candidates can all make a legitimate claim that they are outspoken advocates outside the political establishments of their states. That's a good position to be in this year in these three states where legislatures and retiring governors were by-and-large embarrassed over 1990's contentious and lengthy budget battles.

Taking It Out On Incumbents?

With the federal budget deep in the red, Bush reneging on "no new taxes," and the cost of the savings and loan bail-out escalating, will this be the election when voters

opt to "kick the rascals out," at last making incumbents an endangered species? The results of primaries are not providing much evidence of such a trend. So far, only *one* incumbent has been defeated in a primary, Republican Donald E. (Buz) Lukens (R-Ohio), who was convicted last year for having sex with a 16-year-old girl. He will probably remain the only incumbent to suffer that fate in 1990. That compares to two such victims in 1986, ten in 1982, and five in 1978.

One good race to watch to gauge the depth of anti-politician feelings is the governor's race in Massachusetts, a state wracked with fiscal problems. If former state attorney general and lobbyist Francis X. Bellotti, an insider who is the Democrats' officially endorsed candidate, assumes a commanding lead in the polls, don't expect much of an anti-incumbent tide on November 6.

But the savings and loan issue clearly has incumbents nervous. Some evidence of that is in the growing number who are trying to cleanse themselves by tallying up their campaign contributions from the thrifts or their executives and handing that amount over to the government. During a three-week period from the end of July to mid-August, Senators Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (D-Delaware), Kent Conrad (D-North Dakota), Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), Carl Levin (D-Michigan), and Paul Simon (D-Illinois) all wrote checks to Uncle Sam — except Harkin, who sent his money to the state of Iowa. And none was in serious trouble for their S & L contributions. Conrad isn't even up for re-election this year.

Two recent primaries suggest that the S & L issue has some political salience, but that it's not decisive. In Michigan, conservative activist Clark Durant ran a television commercial suggesting that his GOP Senate primary opponent, Bill Schuette, was too cozy with special interests for not supporting a measure to shut ailing thrifts down sooner. Durant lost the primary, but won a better than expected 40% of the vote. In Colorado, Alamosa attorney Carlos Lucero spoke about almost nothing but the S & L debacle in his Democratic Senate primary contest. He had been dismissed early as a serious opponent, but managed to get 40% of the vote against the winner, former Boulder County commissioner Josie Heath. Did the S & L issue contribute to Durant's and Lucero's showing? Probably — but both had been active in politics and already had a base of support.

The S & L issue will be more potent when it links a candidate to something more than just being part of the establishment. In Minnesota, incumbent Democratic governor Rudy G. Perpich, not a terribly strong candidate to begin with, is hurt further because a campaign contributor he appointed to state boards has been indicted in an S & L fraud case. Some members of Congress who may

have been lax in their oversight responsibilities, or tried to pressure thrift regulators and received S & L contributions, may also be vulnerable.

One race to watch to judge this issue's saliency is the California gubernatorial contest. Currently, Dianne Feinstein and her GOP opponent, Senator Pete Wilson, are trying to link each other to the thrift flap -- without either holding a smoking gun. If they stop running ads on the issue, that might be a sign the public isn't buying.

No Overriding Issue

Taxes are a perennial campaign issue, around again in 1990. And while George Bush wants to stop lip reading on the subject, the states this year increased their own taxes by \$7.6 billion, according to a survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures — the biggest round of hikes since 1983. The bigger the increase in a state, the greater the fallout. In New Jersey, newly elected Democratic governor Jim Florio's popularity collapsed after he pushed through a \$2.2 billion tax increase. In Massachusetts, where taxes were raised \$1.2 billion, there's an initiative to roll them back to 1988 levels. Florida raised taxes on alcohol as part of a \$1.1 billion revenue package and some local bars and restaurants have added messages to their menus advising customers that their meals will be more expensive because Republican incumbent governor Bob Martinez didn't say no. While the public generally seems willing to approve earmarked taxes, like the recently passed California initiative raising the gas tax for highway construction, even this isn't universal. Michigan Democratic governor James J. Blanchard is still paying for his support of a half-cent sales tax increase earmarked to education, defeated two-to-one at the polls last year.

Abortion seems to be less of an electoral flashpoint than one might have expected after the *Webster* decision. The state capitals were once thought likely to become political cockfights over this issue. But Pennsylvania is the only state enacting new restrictions on abortion. The pro-choice forces have won most of the political battles so far, reducing the issue's heat. Abortion will still figure in some races, but it won't girdle national politics. Since everyone is against crime and for the environment, not much partisan heat is likely to develop over two of this year's more widely touted issues.

Some sweeping issue may yet emerge and intrude itself in races across the country. But unless that happens, look to individuals, not issues, to determine November's outcomes.

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