

REFLECTIONS ON THE 1990 ELECTION

By Rhodes Cook

At first glance, the facts of the 1990 balloting are pretty clear. Incumbents, by and large, were returned to office *en masse*. Nearly 97% of Senate incumbents (31 of 32) were reelected, as were 96% of House incumbents (391 of the 407 who sought re-election).

There was more turmoil among the nation's governors, who had to manage the belt-tightening produced by a slow-growth economy and a less beneficent federal government. Yet positioned on what amounted to the political firing line, nearly 75% of all governors (17 of 23) seeking reelection still were able to escape defeat.

The result of all this: the partisan complexion of government hardly changed. Democrats maintained their advantage at all levels below the presidency, and enter 1991 controlling 61% of the seats in the US House of Representatives, 56% in the Senate, 57% of governorships (pending a February runoff election in Arizona), and 60% of the seats of state legislators.

Stop there and 1990 looks like it was a most uneventful political year. Yet to call it a status quo election would describe only the tip of the iceberg. Barely beneath the surface were myriad signs of voter frustration, from low turnout to reduced incumbent reelection margins. The battle cry for 1990 may not have been "throw the bums out," but it certainly could have been "make 'em sweat."

Some of the biggest names in politics struggled to victory. House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., drew a mere 50% of the vote in his suburban Atlanta district; Democratic Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey was reelected with just 51%; Democratic Governor Mario M. Cuomo of New York captured only 53% of the vote in a three-way race; National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Guy Vander Jagt of Michigan was held to 55%; and House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri limped in (by contemporary standards for incumbents) with 57% of the vote. For Gingrich, Bradley, Vander Jagt and Gephardt, it was the lowest vote percentage they had ever attained in their congressional careers. What's more, none of these political celebrities faced major competition in 1990.

Even incumbents who were not sweating on election night found their vote percentage down from 1988. More than two-thirds of the House incumbents who had major-party competition in both 1988 and 1990 experienced a fall off in their share of the vote. Seven senators and

roughly 50 House incumbents suffered a decline of at least 10 percentage points from their previous campaign. Many of those who saw their vote tally plummet were veteran members who boasted a decade or more in the House or Senate. In retrospect, they were obvious targets for the anti-politician, anti-Congress sentiment that tended to swell as the year went along.

Not surprisingly, many voting-age adults did not consider it worth their time to go to the polls. Preliminary numbers compiled by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate indicated that just 36% of the nation's voting-age population cast ballots in 1990—a figure almost identical to the turnout in 1986, when voter participation reached a low for a post-World War II midterm election.

Those who did vote in 1990 seemed frustrated enough to look favorably on ballot initiatives that would limit the tenure of state legislators. Such measures were approved in the three states where voters had a chance to pass on it—California, Colorado, and Oklahoma. The Colorado measure had the widest ramifications. It also called for a term limit on statewide officeholders and members of Congress, even though the constitutionality of a term limit on federal lawmakers has been widely questioned.

On other major issues, voters tended to react more ambiguously. The Supreme Court's controversial *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* decision in 1989, which opened the door for more state regulation on the issue, energized abortion rights activists. And candidates who supported abortion rights were far more likely to advertise that position in 1990 than their counterparts had been in elections of the recent past. Yet as Chuck Alston noted in *Congressional Quarterly's* post-election analysis, the issue cut unevenly. Voters in Iowa reelected anti-abortion GOP Governor Terry E. Branstad but also sent abortion rights Democrat Tom Harkin back to the Senate. Voters in Oregon defeated two anti-abortion rights initiatives, but returned Senator Mark O. Hatfield, a Republican whose stance against abortion was well-known.

Neither party got as much mileage out of the tax issue as they at one point hoped they would. Republicans lost credibility as the anti-tax party when George Bush decided in June that his 1988 "Read my lips" pledge did not really rule out acceptance of new taxes. Yet Democrats were unable to turn the issue into a partisan windfall. The momentum Democrats generated in October by arguing for "tax fairness" began to dissipate in the final days of the campaign, when the widely panned White House-congressional budget summit finally ended and President Bush was able to refocus national attention on the Persian Gulf crisis.

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 intimated 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.

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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