

YOUR TURN:

A Los Angeles Herald Examiner, Sun., May 28, 1978 E-3

Letting the people speak on spending

By G. JAMES JASON

The proposal I want to argue for is hardly novel. The idea that the public should vote directly on bills which involve spending public funds (in a manner somewhat analogous to the "town hall" decision making process of certain New England communities) has been the subject of considerable recent discussion.

Up until the last few years, this idea has been given short shrift, as much for practical as for philosophical reasons; it was impossible to poll the citizenry cheaply, accurately and quickly on any given bill. However, due to the current electronic revolution (an event as significant in man's social and economic history as the industrial revolution), it is today quite feasible.

For instance, the congressional debate on a given bill could be televised, and the viewer could type in a private voter registration number, along with his vote, on a small console attached to the TV. The votes could then be quickly tabulated by a large computer.

The main argument against developing such a direct voting system is the "wise solon" argument. It is argued — not always with a straight face — that the people are subject to sudden passions, susceptible to being misled by demagogues, whereas congressmen act much less in haste, and much more in wisdom.

That congressmen do not act hastily is obvious. However, I would like to see a detailed historical defense of the thesis that, in cases where the solons of a given time adopted a different course of action

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from that which the people would have adopted, the solons usually selected the wisest course.

In any event, my intention is not so much to refute the "wise solon" argument, as to put forward an argument in favor of developing such a direct voter system. The nature of representative democracy makes it politically very difficult to vote against a bill favored by special interests, in the absence of countervailing pressure by other special interest lobbyists.

This situation results in a continual expansion of the size and number of spending programs. While these may benefit some individuals, it adds up to an increasingly onerous burden for all taxpayers. This situation would be rectified if the citizenry as a whole, which has to pay for every spending program, voted directly on those bills involving the creation, or expansion of programs. Therefore, we ought to seize the opportunity afforded by the electronic revolution by creating devices to enable the public to vote directly on such bills.

The structure of Congress makes voting against spending programs politically difficult. Just think of the ordinary congressman faced with a spending proposal favored by one or more special interests, and opposed by none. If he votes against the proposal, he will anger the voters those lobbyists represent. But if he votes for it, while the general public will pay for it (either directly as taxes or indirectly as inflation), he will not lose any of the public's support.

Polls show that general dislike of Congress does not translate into votes against any particular congressman. On the other hand, think about a congressman faced with a bill which would reduce government



spending by cutting back or eliminating some existing program. Every spending program benefits some group, if only the bureaucrats who administer it.

So if the congressman votes for the bill, he angers that constituency, with no compensatory gain in votes from the public at large. But if he votes against it, and against the interests of the public as a whole, he wins the support of that program's constituency. In either situation, the con-

gressman will find it easier to vote against the interests of the public and for the proliferation of programs.

Consider the recent proposal to include government employees in the Social Security system. Social Security being a lousy retirement system, the government employees naturally want no part of it, preferring the sweet deal they already have. But the elimination of their sweet retirement system via their inclusion into the Social Security system is greatly in the public interest, helping rescue Social Security as well as lessening the rise in taxes.

The congressmen, faced with the choice of angering the government workers without getting any tangible return from the public at large, or else pleasing the government workers by shafting the public, chose the shaft. Political reality makes this automatic.

So costly programs grow in number and size, under Republican administrations as well as Democratic ones. Programs are rarely eliminated. Under Carter's "bare-bones" budget, the biggest budget ever, we have the usual variety of new programs.

We have one for the education of disadvantaged children, starting at \$28 million next year and growing to \$400 million in 1984. This program is favored by certain education lobbies, and opposed by no other lobbies. Who could be against such a program — except those who will pay for it? But they (the taxpayers) will certainly not select congressmen for punishment, even if taxes do rise.

This demand by special interest groups for new programs is unceasing; and each program creates its own new special in-

terest group of clients who will scream if that program is ever threatened. But while each citizen benefits from some program or other, the resultant rise in government spending is beginning to crush us all.

There would be far fewer programs created if the public as a whole would have to vote them in. Any group wanting to create a program (or opposing the elimination of an obsolete program) would be forced to convince the majority of the public that that program is so worthwhile that they, the public, should pay for it. I rather imagine special interest groups would not often succeed in doing that.

This seems to me to be one good argument for taking advantage of the opportunity created by the electronic revolution to move toward a (partial) direct democracy.

If the citizens were directly involved in creation of programs, they could not hold their government solely to blame for any bad programs. This would decrease the alienation of the people from their government.

And the current apathy of the public would be decreased. After all, what could hold your interest better than the question of how your money will be spent?

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