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Tyranny of the Many

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THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

In the Spotlight

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

Tyranny of the Many

by Jonathan A. Plucker, Ph.D., assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Maine

In this age of government distrust, the voter referendum appears to be the ultimate democratic fantasy come true: Government by the people, for the people, without any interference by politicians, special interests, or other denizens of the American political system. But referenda in the past couple of years call into question the wisdom of placing legislation directly before the voting public for approval.

As an example, take this year's forestry practices referendum in Maine. Voters had three choices when they went to the polls. They could have pulled the lever for option 2A, severely restrict clearcutting and closely manage timber harvesting. They could have also chosen 2B, placing more lenient restrictions on forestry practices, or the "none of the above" option. Since 2B received 33 percent but not 50 percent of the popular vote, a runoff referendum will be held during the next election cycle.

Confused yet? You are not alone. Commercials and ads supporting or criticizing the three alternatives appeared 24 hours a day on television and in newspapers and mailings. Proponents of each option claimed that their plan saved jobs, the economy, and the environment, while the competing proposals doomed the state to financial and environmental ruin.

To make matters worse, ballot measures' vague and imprecise wording drastically oversimplifies the issues involved. In this way, referenda often prey upon people who are uninformed. This includes people with low levels of education and individuals fighting to find time in their schedules to eat dinner with their families, let alone read detailed descriptions of referendum-related proposals. That covers almost all of us.

If you think that the campaign of misinformation did not affect you during the most recent election, think again. How many people realized that Question 1, the "term limits" question, also contained a clause authorizing a Constitutional Convention? Even though the media did not mention this caveat until a few days before election day. Not surprisingly, the question printed on the ballot mentioned nothing about the call for a convention. While the impact of a convention can be debated, voters have a right to know exactly what the ballot questions represent without having to track down and read a copy of a long, wordy and vague document.

Granted, a referendum can force politicians to address specific issues. But it can also force politicians to address an issue prematurely. Consider gay rights restrictions

defeated by Maine voters in a 1995 referendum. A state law codifying homosexual civil rights was not under serious consideration, with politicians and advocates wisely waiting until public opinion was less in flux. By forcing the issue, gay rights opponents created a climate of hostility that put the entire community in an awkward position.

Petitions currently being circulated in Maine would place referenda dealing with the legalization of slot machines, a same-sex marriage ban, and -- most importantly -- a severe property tax cap on the ballot for voter approval in 1997. Given that a very large percentage of property taxes are paid by non-Maine residents, this referendum question would amount to significant tax relief for non-residents. Even worse, the effect upon schools could be initially devastating, as the results of similar referenda passed in California and Massachusetts have proven.

Maine is too poor to raise funds for schools through other mechanisms, especially since the legislature recently capped the state income tax. Several groups and individuals, including politicians, civic groups and educators, are working to develop new funding and consolidation plans to alleviate the financial burden posed by education, but these efforts are all for naught if a property tax cap is approved.

Regardless of the final vote tally on the various referenda in November of 1997, several outcomes are guaranteed. Hundreds of thousands of dollars will be spent to sway public opinion through a mix of half-truths and outright deception. Another in a seemingly annual series of divisive issues will pit neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, further eroding our trust in government and community.

Politicians are elected (and their staffs are hired) to deal with complex issues because the rest of us do not have the time and energy to keep current with every arcane yet pertinent detail that may affect our lives. The next time you overhear people complaining about government or public education, ask them whether their vote during a recent referendum contributed to the mess politicians are obligated to clean up.

This piece appeared as an op-ed in the Kennebec Journal and the Mid-Maine Morning Sentinel.

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