



The Lord of the Flies election

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By Donald Cohen

When I think about election day next week, the mental image I find most fitting is in the 1954 classic, the “Lord of the Flies,” about a group of teenagers stranded on a desert island that revert to savagery in their struggle for survival.

Californians struggling to keep important programs are on a different kind of island. The metaphorical island that we are on now is the one built by Proposition 13 and the Howard Jarvis tax rebellion of the late 1970s. That was the beginning of California’s descent from a once golden state of opportunity to a land starved of investment and resources.

Proposition 13’s tax caps, along with the requirement for budgets to be passed with a two-thirds supermajority, mean that a minority could thwart the aspirations of most Californians’ desires for high-quality services; great education that is the envy of the nation; a world-class infrastructure that is clean, green and essential for a productive business climate; and a health care system that meets the needs of all.

Now that vision of California is crashing against a legally empowered legislative minority that above all refuses to raise any revenues so it can starve public coffers.

The batch of initiatives negotiated with the minority party committed to downsizing and eliminating public services is creating an unfortunate scramble to the bottom. This, in turn, is causing teachers arguing with teachers, social service providers struggling to maintain vital early childhood programs, mental health professionals struggling to keep their services accessible for poor Californians and all of us confused about which one of our favorite programs we should side with and protect.

So, instead of voting for programs to extend health care, reduce class size or address global warming, we have to choose between cutting teacher salaries, increasing class size, eliminating care for a sick infant or slashing mental health services for teenagers in need.

Proposition 13 was the fuse that started de-funding public services but also created budget-distorting side effects. With the legislature unable to act with simple majority rule, others have stepped forward to do good things at the ballot - such as creating vital early childhood development programs, mental health programs for the indigent and many others.

Unfortunately, ballot box budgeting means that only those issues with sophisticated advocates and political savvy are addressed. It leaves other needs behind. For example, no one has advanced a ballot measure to pay for health care for California’s tens of thousands of home care workers so they and many others get left behind.

What is remarkable is the ballot measures that raise specific taxes for specific programs win the support of the majority of voters at the polls. At the same time minority party politicians are super-glued to a no-new-tax-pledge and refuse to raise revenues for programs they know Californians support. It's the ultimate paradox that defines California's descent into a "Lord of the Flies" election where advocates for schools, children and the disabled fight over dwindling resources.

The right wing and the starve-the-government types can sit and watch with glee as advocates for a robust public social and physical infrastructure scramble for limited dollars. It's an island of despair where those of us who care about the state's future are fighting over the crumbs left behind by several decades of post-Proposition 13 neglect.

It is a terrible situation and can only be rectified by eliminating minority rule in the state and developing a rational approach to budgeting. Of course, the state should live within its means but we should always start with our vision and our aspirations for a great California and then have the guts to speak honestly about what it takes to get there.

Every person, every family, every community has shown that it will sacrifice today for a better tomorrow. If we want our children to go to college, we put money aside to make sure that it can happen. If we want a new home we invest upfront and pay the price to make it happen over time. We never believe these things are free and we always expect to do what's necessary.

It has always confused me that conservatives will advocate for cutting taxes at the same time as promising more and better services. It's a "free lunch" agenda that is the height of hypocrisy and deceit. They decry tax and spend while their real agenda is spend without asking people to pay their fair share. It is fiscal irresponsibility wrapped in populist rhetoric. And, as was their ultimate endgame, it has successfully left Californians fighting over the path of our own decline.

It looks like this election may not go well for anyone. Defeat of the initiatives will put the state further in the hole. Passage of the initiatives will starve essential programs and lock in budget limits that will hurt already underfunded programs or those where needs will grow in coming years as the population ages.

And everyone will feel bad about it except for those who don't want to make our schools the envy of the nation, that don't care if home care workers have no healthcare of their own or that don't see the need to provide support for disabled people and low-income children. Howard Jarvis, wherever he is, must be very happy right now.

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