Children's Advocacy Institute

University of San Diego
School of Law
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110
(619) 260-4806
(619) 260-4753 (Fax)

926 J Street
Suite 709
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 444-3875
(916) 444-6611 (Fax)

Reply to:
☐ San Diego
☐ Sacramento

www.caichildlaw.org

The San Diego Union-Tribune published this commentary on November 7, 2005

Ballot is Missing Democratic Reform

By Robert C. Fellmeth

November 7, 2005

As the torrent of sound bites begins to abate, we might take stock of what our initiative process has wrought – aside from the obvious bonanza in television ad revenue.

We have been presented with reforms that purport to address the real problems we face. In this regard, we betray our real values by what problems we select as warranting attention, as well as how we propose to deal with them.

Consider, for example, Proposition 76. The thesis here is that spending is out of control; as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger repeatedly puts it: our problem is not revenue, it is "overspending." His solution is to limit the 2006-07 budget to no increase (accomplishing a 3 percent to 5 percent inflation/population adjusted cut) and then limit future spending to the average of the prior three years of revenue.

California's existing fiscal rules are already unique: The state has an existing limit on overall spending. And it has a property tax limit. And it has item veto power for its governor. But that is not all. It has a two-thirds vote requirement to raise taxes. And the same supermajority must then be mounted to end or reduce any of the now $30 billion in special tax breaks that reduce the general fund annually.

And on top of that, we have a two-thirds requirement to enact a budget. Two other states do that – and no other state has all of these impediments to child investment.

We also have a minority political party that allows a majority vote in its caucus to bind all of its members in floor votes on the budget. Translated, that means that eight senators can vote in a caucus of 15, binding that number and in turn blocking any revenue and any spending.

Now add to that a redistricting pattern that stacks each district with voters to remove the other party's voters so all have safe seats. This discourages the election of moderate legislators and stimulates the choice of reactionary extremists (in both directions).

Has this structure really produced excessive spending? The governor likes to cite raw number increases. But population and inflation change annually, and the correct measure adjusts for them. Taking the relevant indicator, percentage of personal income, we spent 7.4 percent for the general fund in 1977. That percentage in 2005-06 would produce $11 billion more than budgeted.

Tax breaks increase year to year. And we self-indulgently push obligations forward and fail to match the personal income commitment of our parents. Consider:

The total child safety net (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Food Stamps) has declined from close to the poverty line in the 1980s to below 68 percent of the line – with further reductions planned.

Medical coverage is not provided to almost 1 million California children despite qualification of most for a 2-to-1 federal match to provide it – billions in federal money unclaimed.

K-12 California classes are now the second largest in the nation, and cost-adjusted education spending per child places California among the bottom five states.

Higher education capacity per 18-year-old (from community college to university) is lower than in 1991 and will decrease further in 2005-06.

We properly ask the governor: These four accounts represent over 90 percent of child spending; exactly which of them represents "overspending?" We do not have an answer.

And the media have not demanded one – notwithstanding the hypocrisy of his Proposition 49 personal sponsorship for more after-school child care spending. He now attempts Draconian state penurious investment to assure that little to nothing will ever be spent under its terms.

Budget shortfalls during the Republican Reagan and Wilson administrations yielded a balanced response to make up the deficit – half by spending cuts and half by enhanced revenue. Both approved tax increases of $4 billion in current dollars. The Schwarzenegger administration confronted a $7 billion shortfall by cutting the vehicle license fee income by $4.6 billion, thus creating an $11.6 billion problem. He then announced a categorical prohibition on new revenues – while increasing by 30 percent to 100 percent tuition on youth, co-pays for child health and fees for child care and foster care providers.

The budget rules in California are stacked against child investment and democratic values. How ironic to listen to Republicans in Washington, D.C. bemoan Democratic threats to filibuster judicial nominees.

Here is the question to ask the party: If 40 percent blocking a decision (for a lifetime judicial appointment) is politically immoral, what about 20 percent having the power to block child investment – regardless of the views of the majority?

Now why isn't this distortion the subject for reform by the initiative process?

Fellmeth is Price professor of public interest law and director of the Children's Advocacy Institute at the University of San Diego.