

EDITORIAL • November 11, 2002

Victory for the suburban mentality

This year, voters faced choices on ballot measures and initiatives ranging from loosening marijuana laws to tightening animal-cruelty statutes. While voters' decisions on the largely liberal-group-sponsored measures reflected the national trends that swept Republicans into control of the Senate, they failed to conform to any national party stereotype. If anything, their choices seemed to reflect a victory for the suburban mentality.

For instance, each one of four statewide proposals to soften drug laws — ranging from Ohio's Issue 1, which would have allowed those convicted of drug possession charges to receive treatment instead of jail time, to Nevada's Ballot Question 5, which would have softened penalties for marijuana possession — lost, sometimes by large margins. Ohio's Issue 1 lost by almost 35 percent. Similar measures had succeeded in previous elections, and while unprecedented personal campaigning by DEA Administrator Asa Hutchinson and Drug Czar John Walters undoubtedly contributed to their defeats, it also suggests that voters remain rather ambivalent on the issue.

In contrast, ballot measures against animal cruelty succeeded in two of the three states they were offered. Florida's widely publicized constitutional amendment on confining pigs succeeded, as did Oklahoma's State Question 687, which banned cockfighting.

As voters opened their hearts to animals, they opened their pocketbooks to a wide variety of educational initiatives, even those with uncertain price tags. Florida narrowly approved an expensive measure to limit class sizes, and California's Proposition 49 (backed by Arnold Schwarzenegger), which will increase funding for before- and after-school programs, won easily, even though the state is facing a huge budget deficit. Oddly, a ban on bilingual education succeeded in Massachusetts but failed in Colorado.

While voters in Virginia approved a bond measure for education, they turned down two proposals to raise the sales tax for transportation projects. That reflected national trends, since apart from educational spending, most big-budget items fared badly.

The Initiative and Referendum Institute suggested in its General Post Election Report that, in uncertain

financial times, voters will be wary of ballot measures' bottom lines except when it comes to educating their children. The report concluded by claiming that the referenda results demonstrated that "the line between conservatives and liberals is blurring."

One reason for that could be that more and more individuals of voting age own stock. Between 1960 and 1999, the percentage of share-owning households has risen from 18 percent to almost 50 percent, according to the American Shareholders Association (ASA), an educational project of Americans for Tax Reform. A 2-year-old ASA-Zogby poll suggested that voters tend to acquire Republican attitudes as they acquire stock, a trend that seems to have carried into this year's voting on initiatives. It may also help explain why scaring voters on Social Security did not work for Democrats this year.

The fate of this year's ballot initiatives suggest that the suburban mentality — tough on crime, friendly to animals, eager for education but worried about the bottom line — was a potent force, one to which Republicans should continue to appeal.