

Earl Raab

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AN INTELLIGENT PUBLIC?

One of the nice things about this last California election is that it didn't provide much grist for the pundits.

Was there a dark "reactionary" trend among the voters? Then why did they vote against Proposition 9, that plot of the corporate giants against the poor and the sick people of the state?

Was there then a new "liberal" trend among the voters? Then why did they vote against Proposition 11, that crusade of the poor people against the corporate giants?

Did they vote, in compassionate "liberal" fervor, to make it easier to build low-income housing? No, they did not. Did they vote, in repressive "conservative" fury, to put a brake on freedom of the press? No, they did not.

What the devil did they think they were doing? Perhaps the people are just so dumb that they are easily manipulated by the media and by those who can afford to mount slick media campaigns? But then how do you explain the results in Proposition 10? The proponents of Proposition 10 spent almost exactly the same amount -- about 6 million dollars -- as did the opponents of Proposition 11. In both cases, they out-spent their antagonists by a wide margin. In both cases, they were handled by the same public relations firm. But the big-money campaign won in one case, and lost in the other.

Is it possible that the people exercise *judgment*? Is it possible that the people have a pretty fair idea of what the issues are? Most terrible question of all: Is it possible that most people are about as smart as you and I are ... that they are no more subject to being robotized by TV campaigns than you and I are? Can that be possible?

Earl Raab  
"An Intelligent Public?"  
page 2

There is a traditional poker story about how, after each hand is decided, the winner laughs and jokes and the loser growls: "Deal the lousy cards," or words to that effect. So, the morning after the election, the winners laugh and joke and the losers growl, at some length: "The people were criminally misled by a slick media campaign and did not understand the issue. Next time we'll mount a better educational campaign." An "educational campaign" is something that *you* do; when your opponent does it, it is a "slick media campaign."

It is particularly difficult for ideologues or sloganeering pundits to tolerate an "inconsistent" public -- that is, a public which is not consistently "liberal," "conservative" or whatever. The problem is that these ideologues and sloganeers set up their own criteria for consistency. Is it possible that the public -- or rather, the various publics out there -- are just consistently intelligent about their own self-interest; and even about their own *enlightened* self-interest?

And is it possible that *such* a consistency is more healthy than conformity to an abstract ideological pattern? After all, the bedrock basis of democracy is that, on the whole, everyone is the best judge of what's good for himself/herself -- and is not the best judge of what's ideologically good for someone else. The natural popular suspicion of a "do-gooder" is based on that proposition.

Of course, that bedrock basis of democracy had better be enlightened self-interest -- which at least means that it is in our own self-interest to help other people in certain circumstances. A lot of people voted *for* (tax-cutting) Proposition 13 a couple of years ago, and *against* (tax-cutting) Proposition 9 last week. Is it because they have become less "mean-spirited" than they were a couple of years ago? Or is it partly because they wanted to cut government expenditure, **but did not** want to radically cut government services to the needy?

Earl Raab  
"An Intelligent Public?"  
page 3

Is it possible that people make their decisions on the basis of an internal consistency which has little to do with "liberalism," "conservatism" or such molds -- but, rather, with an intelligent appraisal of each issue as it may affect their enlightened self-interest? That would be a hard blow to MYOPIA (the Me-and-You Order of Pundits and Ideologues of America).

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