

LOS ANGELES DIARIST

Propped up

HERE'S WHAT I DON'T GET ABOUT California. I write on politics for a living. I read four newspapers a day, scan half a dozen political magazines weekly, and would barely notice if everything but CNN and C-SPAN dropped off my cable system. In other words, I'm weird. Yet voting here for the first time last month, in the ballot proposition capital of the universe, I didn't have a clue what most of this year's fifteen state measures were about. I can't believe I'm alone. Which raises two questions: How in the world are people expected to vote on all this? And what ever happened to *representative* democracy anyway?

OF COURSE I HAD A FEEL FOR THE biggies, like proposition 209, the anti-affirmative action California Civil Rights Initiative. And 210, which raised the minimum wage faster and higher than the recent federal hike, was straightforward. But, beyond that, I felt paralyzed. No doubt some medicinal uses for marijuana make sense (215)—but who knows what fresh hell lurks down that slippery slope? Reinstating a top tax bracket (217) sounds progressive, but state income taxes are already sky-high. The explanatory squibs on the sample ballot they sent out only further clouded things. Take 207. It "prohibit[ed] attorneys from charging excessive fees" (good), but also "prohibit[ed] restrictions on the right to negotiate the amount of attorneys' fees" (suspicious). Dueling props 214 and 216 cracked down on evil HMOs, but it was impossible to tell how they differed or if either was wise. Then there was the "Veterans' Bond Act of 1996"—a good idea? How should I know? Prepping to be a proper California voter looked like a serious lifestyle choice, like the kind of commitment you know you'd have to make to optimize all those frequent flyer offers. Wasn't there someone I could hire to look into this for me, like a politician? Presuming that my own pique mirrored statewide opinion, I figured most of my fellow Californians simply skipped this stuff altogether. But no: it turns out ballot measures get about as many votes as governors, senators and presidents; and pundits back east regularly cite the out-

come of California ballot propositions as evidence of mighty tides of opinion about to sweep across the rest of the country and remake American politics (and with enough punditry, it sometimes even happens).

THE DAYS BEFORE THE ELECTION saw a wave of ads bankrolled by trial lawyers, unions and other bigshots eager to bypass Sacramento's stasis and buy their policy retail: more proof that unintended consequences rule the world. This wasn't what California's famous progressive-era governor, Hiram Johnson, had in mind when he introduced the ballot initiative in 1911. Then it was a populist move to wrest power from the hands of the railroad-dominated state legislature, a kind of *Mr. Smith Goes to Sacramento*. Today's proposition was look more like a scene that didn't make the final edit of Steve Martin's *L.A. Story*. While Angelenos inch along miles of clogged free-



ways, the car radio serves up a strange staccato symphony of "Yes!" and "No!" and "Yes!" and "No!" on "two-oh-four-oh-eight-oh-nine." Only one ad broke through with a slogan you couldn't shake: "9-1-1 could save your life. Proposition 2-1-1 could save your life's savings." (Don't ask how—it lost.) I thought newspaper endorsements might help me shortcut the hard work of citizenship, but my Inner Contrarian took over. After all, the press missed the Savings and Loan crisis; how could I be sure that if I looked into county finance or prison construction I wouldn't come down differently from my local newspaper editors? Other supporters didn't clinch things, either. When the clean government fanatics at Common Cause stand behind one campaign finance measure and clean-government maniac Jerry Brown backs its rival, you're pretty much on your own (or at sea: in 1988, Californians approved two measures that simultaneously provided and banned public funding for campaigns). It's one thing to pick a candidate like you pick a detergent or a running shoe. But to make actual policy this way takes democracy a leap of faith too far. You'd have to be nuts, I kept thinking, to cast a vote based on this circus. Then my wife told me that's exactly what she was doing.

AS IT HAPPENS, OUR MARRIAGE IS a nice window onto an enduring democratic dilemma. I'm the champion of representation, who expects elected officials to handle things I know nothing

about and resents the buck being passed to me. Jody, the romantic democrat, says her uninformed vote is as good as anybody else's. She listens to the ads, picks up what she can from the papers, and then, like any freshman congressman, takes her cue from like-minded experts and votes. The more she explained how easy this was for her, the more I wondered whether I'd thrown my life away on a terrible mistake. I don't mean Jody; I mean political journalism. What use is my craft, I sulked, if there's no public habit of deliberation, no market for analysis that helps make our collective decisions

rational? Nothing new in this lament, I know; but California's proposition fever made my deepest fears of personal futility surge to the surface. Maybe trying to clarify the stakes on public issues isn't the noble endeavor I'd imagined; maybe, in the age of television, it simply misses the point. If Lincoln and Douglas reprised their debates today, is it so clear

that all their words, and a thousand reporters' parsing of them, would add up to more voter insight than the impression that "the tall guy seems thoughtful" or "the twerp can't stop sweating"? Maybe the whole word-peddling machine, decked out in First Amendment finery and cloaked in pretensions of relevance, is a sham. "Proposition 218 on last week's ballot," went the tease for "Which Way L.A.?", the city's best public affairs program, capturing my postmortem blues: "Did you vote for it or against it—and what did you think it would do?"

SO THERE I WAS IN THE VOTING booth at Marquez Elementary School. It only took a minute to punch the ticket for my lesser-evil candidates (we don't pull levers in California). Then came the ballot measures. I punched "no" on 209, "yes" on the minimum wage, and was about to call it a day when 204, "The Safe, Clean, Reliable Water Supply Act," caught my eye. I haven't the faintest idea what it does. I've seen things called the Alliance for Environmental Stewardship turn out to be a strip miners' trade group. Yet, in my mind's eye, I suddenly saw the ad with the names of what seemed to be dozens of newspapers and civic groups who endorsed the act floating across a blue field. Yielding to an impulse I can't fully describe or defend, I punched "yes." It turns out I'm a romantic. I still feel a little funny about it.

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