

Virginia Viewpoint

Referenda: Overruling Our Unrepresentative Representatives

By John Taylor

Summary

Voters in 24 states have decided that they do not want to have to wait for election days to roll around before they correct the mistakes of out-of-step politicians. Perhaps Virginians should consider referenda as a way of providing adult supervision over our political process.

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The political class despises referendums and their close cousins, initiatives, because they take political power out of the hands of the elected few, and place it squarely in the hands of the people. Referenda don't merely allow the people to second-guess politicians, they give the people the ability to overrule politicians.

House Speaker William Howell has proposed that the most sensible way to break the impasse between the House and Senate over Virginia's finances is to put the matter before the voters to gain their opinion. The response from Governor Warner and pro-tax increase legislators like Sen. John Chichester was less than enthusiastic.

"Extremely irresponsible," and "an abdication of leadership," said Warner. "Shenanigans," and "not what typically responsible Triple-A states do," echoed Chichester. If they would only tell us what they really think, we might actually get somewhere on this matter.

But seriously, why the strong opposition to a referendum on taxes? Well, several reasons, actually. For one, the political class despises referendums and their close cousins, initiatives, because they take political power out of the hands of the elected few, and place it squarely in the hands of the people. Referenda don't merely allow the people to second-guess politicians, they give the people the ability to overrule politicians. And for any elected official who has grown used to the deference and coddling of lobbyists, and assorted sycophants, being overruled by the masses is a direct, personal rebuke that's second only to being defeated for re-election.

Of course, there is also the uncomfortable reminder for Warner and others that the last time they embraced referenda in Virginia – the proposed sales tax hikes in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads in 2002 – they lost...badly. Voters rejected the tax hikes despite the fact that Warner's pro-referenda forces massively outspent the opposition (\$2.2 million versus \$40,000 in Hampton Roads alone).

But the most likely reason the pro-tax forces are so opposed to the idea of a referendum on taxes is that unlike in 2002, when they had every reason to think they would win, they can entertain no such hopes this time around.

A recent poll by McLaughlin & Associates shows just how grim the pro-tax prospects are. The March 9th poll of 400 likely general election voters found 65 percent would rather cut spending and services than increase taxes. Even in Northern Virginia, 53 percent of respondents would cut spending and services before raising taxes. Support for cuts is strongest in Western Virginia (73%) and the Richmond area (72%).

Okay, so people would rather see the budget cut than fork over more

continued

money to the Richmond crowd. They seem to agree with Moody's Investors Service senior vice president Bob Kurtter, who recently noted, "If the decision of the Commonwealth is not to raise taxes, then fine; just don't continue to spend more than you raise."

But are Virginians willing to vote on such weighty matters themselves – are they willing to pull the trigger that could possibly imperil the future of education, condemn us to driving on swollen roads, and allow those nefarious Wall Street bond traders to cut our debt rating? Sen. Chichester believes this would be passing the buck "at the 11th hour, without background." Virginians, who have a nagging habit of paying attention to what transpires in the state capitol's hallowed halls, think otherwise: 78 percent say let's vote on it.

What do the people have to say about Governor Warner and Lieutenant Governor Tim Kaine's 2001 campaign promises to put tax hikes before the voters? Seventy-six percent want them to keep their promises, and put the matter before the public. This must be especially hard on Kaine, who compared referendum supporters to Pontius Pilate. But it's good news for anyone with the desire to challenge him on the matter in a Democratic primary for governor – because 76 percent of self-described Democrats in the poll said he and Warner should keep their word.

Of course, this leads to a side-issue relating to any referendum: Warner and Kaine have higher political ambitions. A nasty referendum outcome could severely damage those plans. Could Governor Warner, long considered the likely foe of incumbent Senator (and referendum supporter) George Allen, recover in time to make a race of it? Or worse, could the mere possibility of a referendum doom his nascent desire to become John Kerry's running mate?

And what of Tim Kaine? Long considered a shoo-in for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, could a referendum stumble do irreparable damage to his cause against likely GOP nominee (and referendum supporter) Jerry Kilgore? Possibly. The point is a referendum injects a huge degree of uncertainty into the best-laid plans of ambitious politicians. Better to stop it now, than have to fight for it and risk failure, or worse, down the road.

Of course, these poll numbers, like those of any poll, reflect sentiment at a moment in time. Attitudes can and will change. But one thing these numbers indicate that cannot be explained or harrumphed aside: Virginians are willing to see the budget cut before they see taxes raised. And they most definitely want to have their say on any proposed tax hike. It may not be "the Virginia way" to put difficult matters before the voting public. But as that tribune of the people, Sen. John Warner, said, "politics be damned!"

And politics as usual, too, Senator. Governor Warner, Lieutenant Governor Kaine, Sen. Chichester, and the rest of the amen chorus have a simple choice: Put the issue before the voters and let us have our say, or abandon the very people whose interests they claim to represent and await the (unpleasant) consequences.

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(John Taylor is president of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, an education and research organization headquartered in Potomac Falls, Virginia. **Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliations are cited.**)

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