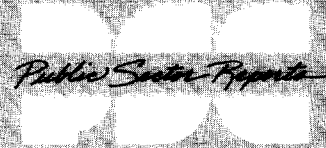


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Michigan COMMENTARY

POLITICAL CYCLES

by Craig Ruff

So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the past.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s newest work, The Cycles of American History, is a brilliant reflection on America's political past, which he characterizes as an ebb and flow of counterforces as natural, and perhaps inevitable, as the seasons and tides. There are some eras in which the public purpose dominates; in others, private self-interest dominates.

What distinguishes a public-interest era from a private-interest era? To simplify the distinction, compare "Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country" with "What is good for General Motors is good for America." When societies place national goals such as eradication of poverty above individual needs such as high wages, there is apt to be considerably more governmental activism, both in domestic and foreign affairs, than when societal causes are less important than individual circumstances.

National Political Cycles

Schlesinger, as did his father before him, sees history as eras of political activism--the Civil War, the New Deal, the Great Society--alternating with eras of political retrenchment--the period of Republican domination from 1865 to 1901, the Eisenhower years, and the conservative 1970s and 1980s. Times of political activism generate fervor, spawn crusades that "make the world safe for democracy" or "declare war on poverty," push private concerns about home and the workplace to a lower priority, and take a significant toll on human energies. Hence, they are followed by times of rest; social causes are supplanted by private causes such as business development, leisure and recreation, and consolidation and growth of financial wealth.

Predictably, the private-interest/public-interest political cycles conform fairly closely to the twenty-year cycles of generations as well as of international policy and economic conditions. It is not surprising that people whose first consciousness of politics came during the conservative 1920s of presidents Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge became the majority of the electorate and primary voter bloc of the 1950s, the era dominated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Neither is it surprising that their successor generation, those who in their youth in the 1930s adopted Franklin D. Roosevelt as their political role model, turned to

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s when this generation, in its middle age, comprised a large segment of voters.

American foreign policy, like domestic policy, tends to follow cycles, though foreign and domestic levels of activism do not always coincide. Foreign policy is marked generally by interventionism during public-interest periods (1900-20, 1930-50, and 1960-70) and by more isolationist sentiment during private-interest periods (1920-30, 1950-60, and 1970-). When a nation is investing considerable energy in domestic activity, its people are not inclined to expend substantial energy on international fronts. Typically, when America enters a public-interest phase, such as during the Great Depression in the 1930s, Americans become indifferent to foreign affairs; but, then, at the peak of public-interest periods, such as in the mid-1960s, the desire to influence world events again begins to grow.

Sentiments about foreign policy are always subject to forces and events initiated beyond our borders. Hence, even during private-interest cycles, American foreign policy can be aggressive; witness the invasion of Grenada, the bombing of Libya, and the Nicaragua situation of the past decade.

In terms of economic policies, there is greater public support for government spending in public-interest periods and less support for these programs in private-interest periods. Social initiatives (the New Deal, the Great Society) sell far more easily to the majority of Americans during periods when public interest is strong and far less easily during private-interest times.

Predicting Political Cycles

How accurately can future political sentiment be predicted using the theory of public-interest/private-interest cycles? In 1924, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., predicted that Coolidge-style conservatism would last until 1932. Then, in 1939, he predicted that the prevailing liberal mood of the time would run its course by about 1947. (In 1946, the GOP regained control of Congress.) In 1949, he forecast that the more conservative era would end in 1962, give or take a year. (Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961.) He said further, "on this basis the next conservative epoch will commence around 1978." Political predictions do not get much more accurate than these.

That Americans, including Michigianians, are presently concerned with private interests is evidenced by the tax-cutting, deregulatory, fiscal restraint, and economic development thrusts of the federal and state governments. Putting aside labels such as conservative or liberal and political party allegiance, there is little doubt that in the past decade or so, the policies enacted by federal and state elected officials have reflected the self-interest of the majority of voters; the past ten years have not been an era of social foment, governmental expansion, and public causes. It is as if the body politic drew a collective deep breath and sought respite from the 1960's agitation over Vietnam, civil rights, the War on Poverty, the Great Society, and other divisive social issues and aggressive government activity.

One can never be quite sure when one era ends and another begins. If we were able to pinpoint exactly when the current era of private interest set in, we could count twenty years--the average length of the political cycles and, not coincidentally, the time span between human generations--and predict when

the current era will end. Quite reasonably, one can argue that the public-interest era of the 1960s ended with the election of Richard Nixon in 1968. The short life of the last public-interest era (1961-68) can be attributed to the intense level of activism, both in foreign (i.e., Vietnam) and domestic (i.e., Great Society) matters, which required an earlier pause than would normally be expected. If the private-interest cycle began in 1968, one can explain the more cautious presidents elected since: Nixon, Ford, Carter (the most conservative Democrat to be elected president in this century), and Reagan. These leaders certainly had a more skeptical view of the role of government and were less inclined to embark on major domestic policy initiatives than were Kennedy and Johnson.

Is the Nation Entering a New, More Activist Cycle?

One can contend that the current private-interest cycle was ushered in by Reagan in the 1980 election--that the activist cycle that began in the early 1960s did not run its course until then, and that Nixon, Ford, and Carter--while more cautious than Kennedy and Johnson--substantially sustained the domestic activism of the 1960s. This would mean that the nation has another dozen or so years of policy restraint left in the current cycle. This theory, however, neglects the passive, antigovernment, and generally conservative drift of political opinion since Nixon's inauguration; it is more likely that the private-interest cycle, nearly twenty years old, has about run its course and that the nation is on the verge of a swing toward more activism.

Schlesinger, Jr., believes we will enter a new activist era around 1990, give or take a couple of years. Some signs, in fact, do point to ebbing fortunes for Republicans, the party normally associated with private-interest politics: Democrats have regained a healthy lead in voter identification and they made substantial gains in the 1986 U.S. Senate races. Democratic prospects for regaining the White House in 1988 are far from poor. Nonetheless, using political cycles to predict single election results is foolhardy. They are more properly used as a tool in discerning the kind of political leadership that may be in the offing.

If we are, indeed, on the threshold of a new public-interest cycle, then we can predict that we shall see in national politics the emergence of new, activist themes: expansion of human services, civil rights, women's rights, and social welfare. Generally, the beginning of a public-interest cycle is marked by isolationist sentiment as the public turns its energies toward domestic reforms rather than foreign involvement. If we are near the close of the current private-interest era, we will begin to see growing disenchantment with international activism, defense spending, and brinkmanship.

If the shift in public mood is consistent with past cycles, candidates in 1988 who support the status quo, defend Reagonomics, and endorse "age of limits" themes will begin to look shopworn and will be less successful. An important factor in this potential shift is the maturing as a political force of the first wave of baby-boomers, those born between 1946 and 1957 (the year in which the birth rate turned down again). These 30-to-40-year-olds are children of parents who came of political age under Roosevelt and Truman. Their own political consciousness emerged during the Kennedy-Johnson years. Much has been made of the conservatism and narcissism of the boomers and too little of their political heritage of activism. Their voting force has yet to

be fully felt; it will be in the next two presidential elections. In 1990, 44 percent of the voting-age public will be baby-boomers aged 25-44.

How Does Cyclical Change Affect Michigan Politics?

How have cycles of history influenced Michigan? On the surface, it appears that Michigan has been out of sync with national cycles. During the activist era of the 1930s and 1940s, Michigan's conservative Republicans controlled the legislature and governorship most of the time. G. Mennen Williams presided over a Democratic statehouse in the private-interest Eisenhower era. Then, Republican George Romney swept to and retained power during the Kennedy-Johnson years. William Milliken came to office in 1969, about the time that national politics shifted to private-interest emphasis, and led an expansionist and activist state administration through the more conservative 1970s. These aberrations can be explained by the uniquely personal bonds between Michigan voters and these men. Although personal qualities, far more than philosophical or partisan considerations, kept them in power, there were contrary political forces just beneath the surface of these governors' administrations.

Throughout Milliken's administration, private-interest and more conservative politics were surfacing. No Democratic presidential candidate has carried Michigan since 1968. Illustrating this trend toward conservatism, even in the Democratic party, was George Wallace's 1972 primary victory, fueled by antibusing furor. Conservative Republicans, held in check within the party apparatus during the Milliken years, erupted into a potent political force as soon as he left the governorship. In the 1982 election to name Milliken's successor, conservative Republicans won 70 percent of the GOP primary vote; Richard Headlee, the nominee, was the most conservative GOP gubernatorial nominee in modern times. On the Democratic side that year, William Fitzgerald waged an unusually conservative, pro-business campaign; the man who beat Fitzgerald, James Blanchard, waged his campaign not on traditional liberal, pro-labor issues but on developing jobs and improving the business climate. Although he is a Democrat, Governor Blanchard is viewed by many as distinctly more conservative than was Republican Milliken. At least since 1983 and Blanchard's inauguration, Michigan seems in sync with the national private-interest cycle.

Is Michigan, like the nation, about to embark on a more activist course? The cyclical table suggests it is, though at the state level, the personal characteristics of officeholders so overpower philosophical issues that a significant turnover in our legislature seems unlikely. More probable is that activist legislators--Democratic and Republican--will feel the public pulse changing and resurrect latent social issues, such as welfare, housing, civil rights. Liberal legislators will become less insecure about espousing new and bolder programs. Tax-cut fever will diminish. Look for greater scrutiny of and less enthusiasm for programs that directly benefit private businesses, such as tax abatements and workers' compensation/unemployment insurance reform. Watch for signs that the electorate, like a person waking from a nap, is embracing "New Frontier" concepts (Governor Blanchard's idea of a state-owned transport system, for example). Likewise, look for certain human services issues--such as health care for the poor, welfare grant levels, and the plight of the homeless--to come to the fore. We will know that the era of retrenchment and self-interest is ending when the political pulse-takers begin framing the policy agenda in dormant "liberal" terms.

Prophesying the Political Future

In the ebb and flow of political cycles, all that came before is not discarded; the most popular legacies of the earlier era remain. Just as Eisenhower embraced New Deal programs, Kennedy embraced Eisenhower's space research, and Nixon declined to dismantle the Great Society, the more activist era to come will continue, in all likelihood, many of the popular thrusts of the conservative 1970s and 1980s: the public scrutiny of and apprehension over taxes, for example. It would not be fair to characterize the new era as strictly "liberal" or demonstrably pro-Democratic. Rather, it will be an era in which individuals regain a sense of public mission and a thirst for social change. The deep disenchantment with government, spawned by Vietnam and fed by Watergate, will gradually be replaced by a more trusting view of representative governance and a more buoyant optimism about government's positive role. Look for a greater priority to be placed on commonwealth than on personal wealth.

De Tocqueville, that great observer of American political habits, wrote 150 years ago: "An American attends to his private concerns as if he were alone in the world, and the next minute he gives himself to the common welfare as if he has forgotten them. At one time he seems animated by the most selfish cupidity; at another, by the most lively patriotism." Though de Tocqueville paints private interest eras in a more unflattering way than would some, he paints a true picture of the forces of inwardness and outwardness that push and pull the politics and policies of the nation and state.

The theory of cycles of human nature and political behavior has relevance in explaining the past--and in prophesying the future.

We hope these observations are useful to you.

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