

## THE GOVERNMENT WE DESERVE - *Gene Steuerle*

### AN ISSUE OF DEMOCRACY

I know. It's campaign time. Time for our politicians to promise us more and more. Of course, it is always someone else who will pick up the tab. Senator Russell Long's famous quip still holds: "Don't tax you. Don't tax me. Tax the man behind the tree."

Today "the man" is increasingly the young, who are not only asked to pay more for others and get less for themselves, but who are increasingly being denied their fundamental democratic rights to share equally in deciding just what type of government we should have.

In normal times, additional promises at election time would be okay, even proper. Many of our government institutions—including the tax structure and health subsidies—do need fixing, and the country should have an open debate about how. But these aren't normal times.

The mantra of both Republicans and Democrats today is that no politician can win office by being totally honest about the balance sheet—those spending cuts and tax increases required to pay not just for their new spending increases and tax cut proposals, but all those promises arising from past legislation.

Oh, the Democrats tell us they will tax the rich a bit more, and the Republicans tell us they will eliminate waste. But, in truth, the middle class is so large that it mainly pays for whatever promises do materialize.

The threat is not simply to the economy. Today, our fundamental democratic institutions are threatened in a very new way. While it has become increasingly difficult to deny the vote *de jure* on the basis of property, gender, or race, our laws now discriminate *de facto* against the young.

At its core, democracy is about equal rights to vote—and have your representatives vote—on the nation's current priorities. But many recent laws attempt to deny us—and, even more so, our children—the opportunity to determine those priorities.

The reason is simple, but its effects are profound. Never before in U.S. history have so many promises been made to so many people for so many years into the future. Every additional promise, no matter what its merit, only attempts to tie that fiscal straightjacket tighter around future voters.

If our tax laws merely stay the same from 2006 to 2010, for instance, government revenues would rise by several hundred billion dollars. But guess what? Most of those revenue increases are already committed, mainly to the growing costs of our current health and retirement programs.

It gets worse. In a little more than a decade, we'll likely have around \$1 trillion more in annual revenues, yet under current law almost all of that growth will have been pre-allocated without so much as a nod from the existing or future Congresses.

Until those issues are dealt with up front, new promises by our presidential candidates are largely puffs in the wind.

Do you believe we should spend more on health care for the nonelderly? Sorry, nothing left for that. Help the elderly poor or those in their last years of life? Sorry, we've already promised an increasing share of revenues to younger and healthier seniors. How about tax cuts to restrain government growth? Sorry, tax revenues won't even cover the promises already on record. Spend a little to fix our educational system? Give me a break. The share of spending on children is already scheduled to decline to help pay for an even larger share for groups already getting the lion's share of government spending.

To be clear, the issue here is not whether political promises are for things silly or sane. U.S. history is replete with gut-wrenching and nation-changing debates on how government should wield its tax and spending powers. Those who defended Henry Clay's "American System" believed in expanding public works into ever-more territories. Those opposing Clay considered this form of spending corrupt and objected to the tariffs used to finance them.

Jumping forward about a century, most of Franklin Roosevelt's Depression-era spending priorities aimed to help Americans get jobs and to help support the unemployed. Families who weathered that longest of downturns have been forever grateful as a result. Many family histories, including mine, include stories of relatives who got public service jobs that tided them over.

Economists see it differently, crediting better monetary and fiscal policy, largely following the war effort, for ending the Depression.

Still, in most of the 200-plus years since the American republic was founded, most spending and tax

debates were over projects of the day. They weren't about controlling what government priorities would be in 50 years. Whether worthwhile or horrible, precedent-setting or routine, new laws and programs weren't designed to predetermine government's direction for decades to come.

Given the fix we're in now, the debate over taxing and spending will not and should not end. The crux of the debates from here on out must be distinguishing between laws written for today and mandates for tomorrow. Saddling distant tomorrows with growing commitments forecloses other potential uses of the revenues that come with a growing economy. It takes democracy out of the hands of citizens, especially the young, who can be counted on to rebel—as some already are—against paying for priorities they didn't help pick.

---

As many of my readers know, I am honored to have accepted a job as vice president of the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, in no small part because of its strong commitment to deal with the issue I address above. This column will continue in my new role.

***The Government We Deserve*** is a periodic column on public policy by [Eugene Steuerle](#), vice president of the nonpartisan Peter G. Peterson Foundation, and, for summer 2008, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan [Urban Institute](#). Steuerle is also a former deputy assistant secretary of the Treasury.

To get *The Government We Deserve*:

[subscribe](#) to the e-mail newsletter,

get the [RSS feed](#)

view the [archive of past columns](#),

or simply reply to this e-mail with a request to be added or removed.

**Note to Editors:** Publication of this column is encouraged and permission is hereby granted, provided that the author is properly cited. For information or comments, e-mail [feedback@urban.org](mailto:feedback@urban.org). The opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its sponsors.