

Four Variables for American Politics

Tom Wicker

Ever since last November when Ronald Reagan was elected by rather an enormous electoral college landslide, a debate has proceeded among political analysts and writers, I think among many voters, and particularly among people who might be affected by federal budgetary considerations. A debate has proceeded as to whether the election of Ronald Reagan signals a long term change to the right in American politics as we see in retrospect that the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 signaled a long term trend to the left. The question is, has that long term trend been arrested? After all Ronald Reagan carried all but six states in this country and had one of the largest electoral totals ever recorded. It was also an unusual landslide in that it was not the re-election of a president, but the election of a new president and a change of parties. Landslides of that kind are not so common in American politics. On the other hand he only got 51% of the vote in a three way race. Since only 52% of the American electorate voted last November it is perfectly possible to argue that Ronald Reagan was elected by only 26% of the American electorate. When you combine the totals of President Carter and of John Anderson, the popular vote margin by which Mr. Reagan was elected was only in the vicinity of 3%. So that raises questions about the true nature of his election. There are those who believe that the election of 1980 was an overwhelming rejection of the Democratic Party and particularly of President Carter, but not so much therefore a long term shift to the right. Possibly the best evidence for that election having been a severe rejection of President Carter was the fact that as a Southerner he lost only one of the old Confederate states.



My view is whether or not a long term and significant change in the very nature of American politics has taken place is yet up in the air, and is much more nearly to be decided by the performance of the Reagan administration in office than by the mere fact that the President was elected. My view is that the future of American politics in that sense depends on a number of variables which are yet to be settled. I would say, however, that the evidence is beginning to shift slightly against the idea that we have indeed undergone a long term change.

I would like to look with you this morning at those variables that I think are going to be very important in determining the longer range future, let us say for the sake of argument, the future of American politics for the rest of this century.

Reagan Economic Program

The first of those variables quite clearly seems to me to be the question of the Reagan economic program. There is a paradox between the success that he had legislatively in establishing that economic program and the fact that so far he does not seem to have won great support in the public, in the financial markets, nor has it had the effect that he said it might. There is no question, however, about the tremendous legislative success. I would think that it is the most sweeping legislative success that we have seen since 1965, in the early Great Society legislation. Despite the fact that the House is still controlled by Democrats, he was able to put into place a tax bill shaped to his supply side economic theories, and a tax cut of 25% over three years weighted to the high brackets. Moreover, President Reagan and his supporters touted this economic program as being the answer to our problems. The President, himself, said that it was a program that "will achieve all the essential aims of recovery." He said further that it was "an economic recovery program that is the only answer we have left." He has made very specific pledges for what his economic program will accomplish. It will achieve, if his pledges are redeemed, a 4.5 percent annual growth rate after 1982. Bear in mind that the growth rate now is at about 1 percent annually and dropping. He has predicted that inflation will drop to 8.3 percent in 1982, a prediction that now appears quite likely to

come true, and that it will drop to 5.5 percent in 1984, cutting in half what it was when he came into office, a prediction that seems a good deal less likely to come true.

Now in this economic program there is a built-in contradiction according to the economists, even those who support the program. The first is that in order to contain inflation and bring it down, the President is relying upon the Federal Reserve System to maintain a highly restrictive money policy, visible to most of us in the high interest rates that we have to pay if we borrow any money. At the same time, we have the massive tax cut that I have mentioned to you. A tax cut is designed to spur economic growth and tight money is designed to restrain economic growth. So there is a built-in contradiction. Apparently the supply side economists, if I understand their approach, contend that because of the budget cuts it is possible to stimulate the economy while maintaining tight money without bringing on a new round of inflation. That does not seem to have happened so far. If there was going to be a massive economic boom, one would think that signs of its approach would not necessarily have waited until October the 1st when the tax cut went into effect, but would have been visible about August the 1st when the tax cuts were passed by Congress. Businessmen make their plans on what will happen not necessarily waiting until it does happen. So the signs of that economic boom are not yet apparent.

One of the problems is that by the end of 1984 after the budget cuts, after the tax cuts, and after the military build up, there will be a gap somewhere on the order of one hundred billion dollars between revenues and expenditures — a one hundred billion dollar deficit at the end of 1984 when he promised a balanced budget, unless something else is done. Now what else can be done? We know, it stands to reason, that Congress having passed a tax cut is not going to rescind it. It doesn't work that way in politics, and the President is standing on his tax cut. He shows no signs so far of cutting back on military spending, although Congress may impose some relatively minor cuts in the military budget. Now what is left to do?

After this year, after the 35 billion dollar budget cuts already voted by Congress and after the further 13 billion dollar budget cuts that the President is seeking now, that's 48 billion dollars of budget cuts. I think the administration will seek in fiscal 1982, 1983, and 1984, 74 to 100 billion dollars further over and above what has already been made. Now whether or not that will be sufficient to balance the budget, whether or not that will be a program that the American people will sustain, whether or not in the course of those questions being answered we see an economic recovery, whether or not inflation comes down, whether or not unemployment, which is now rising, also comes down seems to me to be the single most important set of questions raised by the Reagan administration. Until those questions are answered, I don't believe it is possible to say that we have turned conservative in this country, that we have abandoned the New Deal, that we have even abandoned the Great Society. It seems to me that the actual practical workings of those programs are going to mean a great deal more to the American people than the promises that had been made. In reaching those budget cuts, I think a study of the federal budget would show that there is no way that those cuts can be made unless very deep cuts are made into the safety net programs that the President has promised would be untouched.

Social Consequences Of Economic Action

The second variable that I think we should consider is what I would describe as the social consequences of all this economic action. Because, whether that program works or not, we are going to have it. The budget cuts of last year went into effect last week. There is no question that there will be some further budget cuts. Whether they are as much as the president wants, we don't know. There will be further budget cuts next year; there will be the military build up. We are going to have those things. So, what are going to be the social consequences of this economic action? What is the effect of cutting a million people from the roles of food stamp recipients, of cutting back CETA jobs, of cutting Medicare, of cutting children's lunch and nutrition programs, almost across the board with very few exceptions? Some of these cuts are brutal indeed. In New York City, for example, where I live, we have lost 177 million dollars for CETA jobs. That is 13,500 authorized job slots in New York City alone. The city out of its hard strapped finances is going to try to provide 70 million dollars to replace that, but that still means that we are 107 million dollars down, annually, and we would only save about 4,500 job slots at best. 9,000 jobs gone. I don't think you can take 9,000 people off a payroll in New York City without having some kind of social consequences.

What that social consequence might be, one almost hesitates to predict. It seems to me safe to suggest that there will be rising crime rate; there will be a rise in drug addiction; there will be a rise in prostitution; there will be a rise in the prison population. All of those things are predictable

from that kind of an increase in unemployment, not to mention the unemployment that we are going to get from general economic conditions. A University of Chicago study in ten states of six of the programs that had been hit hardest by the Reagan budget cuts, has shown that the greatest impact of those programs will be not so much on the designated poor as on the working poor. For example, consider the mother who works, but who receives some aid to Families of Dependent Children money. In most states the new rules are going to make it unproductive for her to work. She will do better to drop out of her job and take full scale Aid for Families of Dependent Children. There happens to be about 7.2 million children, at this point, on Aid to Families of Dependent Children. Now aside from what this will do to the adults, what is the point and what will be the consequences not just in the short term but in the long term of teaching 7.2 million children that it is better, that it pays you more, to stay home and take welfare than to go out and work? This seems to me to be a policy that cannot have anything other than sharp social consequences.

Now a second area in which we are already seeing social consequences of the economic policy is in the Federal Reserve monetary policy to keep money tight and interest rates high. That means that it is very difficult to borrow money. This is just not some neutral device; it's full of human consequences. It means that small businesses fail at a much higher rate because they can't borrow money. It means that automobiles are more difficult to buy, so the whole automobile industry is in difficulty. The housing industry, as we know everywhere, is in difficulty. A young, working couple today around their mid-twenties, would have to be earning well above \$50,000 a year from both of their earnings to even think about being able to buy a house in most communities. At that, they probably would only be able to think about it and not really do it. High interest rates are a brake on economic growth generally. But, more than that, they are a brake on anybody who has to borrow money for cash flow problems, who has to borrow money in order to buy a house. They cause rising prices, and wages will in almost every case fail to keep up. So there are great human consequences to the high interest rate policy which is the only reliance that this administration and the Federal Reserve have for holding down inflation.

Now the consequences here, both in national economic recovery and the direct effect on human beings, is a very high price to pay. The price is so high that already the Reagan administration is beginning to back away from it. Secretary of the Treasury Regan, if not President Reagan, is complaining out loud that the Fed is keeping money too tight, and that they should relax their grip on the supply of money, so that the economy can grow a little bit. Just relax it a little so that it can grow just a little, he says. But, if that is the case, then the administration's anti-inflation program will be endangered if the Fed heeds Secretary Regan and does loosen up on the money supply.

I said that one didn't want to predict precisely some of the other social consequences of this economic action. I mentioned crime rate, drug addiction, prostitution, etc., and with the greatest of hesitation I will also have to point out that in the 1960s in this country and in Britain this summer there was a reaction in the streets to very much the kind of economic conditions and the kind of economic actions I think may attain in this country next year. That's a prediction you don't want to make for fear it will become self-fulfilling. I certainly think that it is one of the things that the Administration had better keep a very wary eye on next year. How ironic it will be if the Administration in its economic policy should cause urban disruptions and should then respond with a policy of very tough law enforcement and one might even suggest urban repression. Whatever the consequences of these social actions are, I think it is bound to add to a rising sense of hopelessness and despair that is evident in the ghettos of the great cities of this country and which can only bode ill for the future of the country. So the economic program itself and the social consequences of economic action are two of the variables that I think are very important to our political future.

Social Issues

Another area in which it is just now beginning to be important is the whole area of what the Republican conservatives refer to as the social issues. For example, the House has just voted this week on the Voting Rights Act. I was covering the White House under President Johnson when the Voting Rights Act was passed. In more than twenty years of covering politics at the federal level, I regard that as the single most successful act of public policy that I have ever seen! You can measure it perhaps by just a very few statistics. In 1964, before that Act was passed in 1965, there were no Black elected officials in eleven Southern states. By 1968, only three years after the act was passed, there were 156, and by 1980, there were 1,813 Black elected officials in those same eleven Southern states. In the United States generally it has not been a problem confined to

Southern states. I live in Manhattan and Manhattan is covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. Just this Fall the Democratic Primary for the City of Manhattan was not held for city councilmen because we had run afoul of the Voting Rights Act. The redistricting following the 1980 Census was disallowed for having been discriminatory. So this is a national problem. But, in 1965 in the entire United States, there were 300 elected Black officials. By 1980, fifteen years later, there were 4,912. It is very rare, I think, that one can find statistical evidence that is so clear for the efficacy of any such act of public policy as that.

The House has passed the Voting Rights Act, more or less intact. Now the main challenge comes: it will go to the Senate where the Republicans are in control, and the bill will be under the non-too-tender mercies of a senior senator from South Carolina, Honorable Strom Thurmond, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, who indeed in the 1970s has made the singular discovery that a large part of the population of this country is Black, but who seems still to feel that the Voting Rights Act is discriminatory against Southern states. I don't know why that should be thought when I live in Manhattan, certainly not a Southern state, and it applies to me and my jurisdiction just as much as it does to any citizen in South Carolina. The Voting Rights Act is an example of what I mean by the social issues. If President Reagan, who has not yet given his full views but who is traditionally an opponent of the Voting Rights Act, allows himself to be dragged into opposition to that act, then it is clearly a loss for him politically in one sense. If, on the other hand, he supports the radical conservatives of his party in trying to repeal or alter that act, that is clearly a loss for him in another sense. It is one of those issues on which a President cannot win.

Another one of the social issues that is of great importance is what I regard as the radical effort in about twenty-six court stripping bills. Court stripping bills are bills that would strip the Supreme Court of its jurisdiction in certain areas. The twenty-six bills are concentrated in several areas. One has to do with school busing for purposes of racial desegregation. One has to do with prayer in the schools. One has to do with abortion. One is a single bill that would strip the civil Supreme Court of jurisdiction in the event Congress passes a Draft Act applying to men only, so that no one could bring a suit and say that was discriminatory against women. These court stripping bills are a self-evident attempt to bypass the Constitutional procedure for amending the constitution. You can amend the Constitution now by one of two routes: two-thirds vote of each house of Congress and three-quarters vote of the states. That is very difficult to achieve, as those who support the Equal Rights Amendment know. The other route is by constitutional convention, which we have never had in this country. The court stripping bills would in effect amend the constitution by majority vote of Congress. For example, take the question of school busing. If the Supreme Court is deprived of jurisdiction in cases that have to do with school busing, then it cannot even go back and enforce the orders that had to do with school busing, that it may have supported in the past. Those cities and counties of states that have gone ahead in good faith with busing and made it work as best it could would find that nobody else had to do it. Indeed, they didn't even have to enforce what might have taken them ten or more years to develop. So it is a back door method of amending the constitution.

Again, aside from the substance of the issues involved, the whole process is controversial. One of those bills, of course, having to do with abortion is sponsored by Jesse Helms of North Carolina. I would cite also the Family Protection Act, which we haven't heard very much about, but it should be of particular interest to this group. The Family Protection Act is a favorite of the farthest conservatives of the Republican Party. Despite the pledges of the President that he is going to get the government off our backs, some one has said everywhere except in the bedroom. The Family Protection Act would provide for example that parents must be notified when an unmarried minor receives a contraceptive device or abortion related services from a federally funded organization. You may think that that is a good thing. Parents should be notified. But this is Federal legislation requiring that parents should be notified. If that is getting the government off the backs of families and individual citizens, it is very hard for me to see how. The Family Protection Act would restrict the Federal Government from preempting or interfering in any way with state statutes pertaining to child abuse or to spouse abuse. In other words, beating up your wife or beating up your children is going to become strictly a state matter, if this act is passed, and the civil rights protections of the Federal Government simply would not exist any further from that. The Legal Services Corporation would be prohibited from providing any funds for litigation involving divorce. In other words just as abortion, divorce would be made impossible for the poor. You and I could go out and buy one, but the poor will not. Now exactly what the distinction is, why poor people be forced to remain married while the rest of us can make our own arrangements, is difficult to understand. But of particular interest to this organization, the Family Protection Act

would provide a cause of action for parents, if an educational institution receiving federal funds, prohibits parents from reviewing textbooks. You could sue if they did that. This is another of interest to women, I think. It would prevent Federal funds from being used to promote educational materials that denigrate the role of women as it has been historically understood. So I cite that again and not so much because I expect you to be for or against it, either way, but because these things are of obvious, tremendous controversial proportion. They go very deeply to what we feel and how we live. They are not like tax bills; they are not economic matters; they go to the way to look at lives, ourselves, our family; they are of enormous controversy, and the way President Reagan negotiates and politics his way through these controversies, I think, will have a great deal to do with how he is ultimately seen and how the conservative efforts backed by his administration are going to be seen.

Efficacy of Government by Salesmanship and Media

Finally, I would say there is another variable. Another variable that I think is very important is to what extent will government by salesmanship and media really work. Let me explain what I mean. In elective politics, particularly at the national level, politics has become media politics rather than party politics. Now it seems logical to suggest, and indeed we see the evidence for it, that we have media politics if people are getting elected by media, by television. They are. Then they are going to try and govern by television because that is the instrument that they understand. I think that President Reagan is showing his skill in that medium. His ability to appeal and mobilize public support translates itself into political pressures. He is showing that a fundamental tool of his presidency is the media and his ability to appeal to the people. Now how far can you go with that? I think there are two fundamental questions that are not answered. But the first of those questions is: Can media appeals stirring up vast public support which then translates itself into political pressure, substitute for the give and take of representative politics and legislative bodies? Can they substitute for the give and take between interest groups that has always been the hallmark of American politics? Can it substitute really for that more traditional kind of politics which, with whatever failures has served us well over two centuries? The second question I think about government by salesmanship and media is how often can you go to that well? How often can President Reagan appear on national television and tell us that his program is the only program that will work and the only answer that we have left? How often will we believe that kind of appeal? How often can that public support upon which he is so dependent be mobilized in that fashion?