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GETTING
INTO
ISSUES

A Citizen's Guide to
the 1992 Elections

League of Women Voters
Education Fund

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Acknowledgements

Getting Into Issues

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INTRODUCTION

★ It's easy to forget sometimes what elections are about. Defined more by candidates' personalities than by their policies, today's political campaigns can rob voters of their chance to choose. We end up scrambling for scraps of substance, aching for answers to the critical questions of our time.

With the 1992 elections upon us, it's time to say, "Enough!" It's time to remember that elections are about issues — the challenges we face as a nation and the policies we can pursue to make the United States a better place to live and work. Elections are about choices — the options confronting our leaders as they respond to new and developing challenges at home and abroad. And they're about answers — the straight talk we need from candidates about the things they'd do if elected.

What is the role of the United States in this rapidly changing world? What can we do to bring down our sky-high federal budget deficit? With our resources so tied up in debt and other commitments, how can we create jobs and achieve progress on health care, welfare reform and the environment?

These are the questions we need to be asking this year's candidates for President and for Congress. The national leaders we elect in November have an unprecedented chance to reshape our world and to make the United States more responsive to the needs of its people. On virtually every important issue, there are different choices we can make, different directions we can follow. Without an understanding of where the candidates would take us, voting turns to guess work. We lose our chance to send a clear message about where we think this country should be.

Sending that message is what *Getting Into Issues* is all about. In this citizen's guide to the 1992 elections, you'll find background information on the

issues and the choices that will face the national leaders we elect in November. And for each set of issues and choices, there's a set of questions designed to get candidates talking about specifics and to get voters thinking about the answers we need to hear.

So whether you're organizing a candidate debate, meeting with women and men running for federal office or — like most of us — simply following the campaigns in the news, use *Getting Into Issues* as an election-year resource. If you have the opportunity, put the questions on these pages to the candidates yourselves. And if you don't, use the questions and the background information to compare and contrast the candidates' positions and to judge whether they're being substantive and straight.

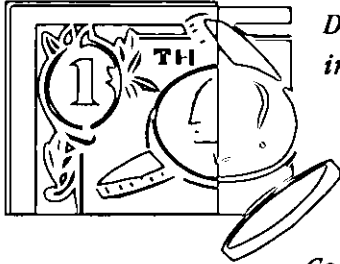
But before judging the candidates, judge for yourself how you feel about the issues. Of the choices presented, which policies and programs do you think the United States should be pursuing? What if we combined elements of some approaches? Or how about trying something completely different?

Voting is never a perfect match — you may agree with a candidate on one issue and disagree on another. What's important is to select the issues you feel are most critical and to choose the candidates who are approaching those issues the way you want to see them approached. As for the candidates not approaching the issues at all, let them know you need answers.

Get into the issues. And don't forget to vote.



THE ECONOMY



Debt and deficit spending are issues that will influence nearly every policy decision our next President and Congress will make.

Getting a handle on the federal budget deficit — estimated at \$400 billion this year — will be a must in the coming years. The recent debate over federal aid to cities in the wake of rioting in Los Angeles gave us a taste of what's to come. Even though it was put together in response to what everybody agreed is a crisis in America's cities, the measure was delayed and scaled back because of arguments over how much we can afford to spend.

THE ISSUES

The U.S. government has run a budget deficit since the 1970s, spending more money each year than we take in through taxes and other revenues. Every time we fail to balance the federal budget, we increase the national debt — the amount of money we have borrowed and not paid back. Debt holds a tight grip on federal government spending because of the interest we owe. In 1992, \$286 billion — one out of every five dollars our government spends — will go to “debt service,” or interest on the \$3.9 trillion we've borrowed.

Debt saps investment, say economists. As long as it continues unchecked, there are fewer and fewer federal dollars for the things we need to spur economic growth in the years ahead — such things as infrastructure (roads, bridges and sewers), education, and research and development of new technologies for industry. Other areas in need of investment? Health care, aid for cities, job training, services for the poor — anything that can help cre-

ate a more healthy and productive America.

The federal budget deficit and the national debt aren't the only reasons for the slow economic growth we have experienced in recent years. Drops in investment by private industry, a decline in the skills of American workers compared to workers in other countries, and even a tired work ethic have been blamed for contributing to the nation's weakened economy. Nevertheless, a new commitment to fiscal responsibility and long-term thinking from our government leaders might be just the thing to inspire change.

THE CHOICES

There are only two ways to reduce the federal budget deficit — cut spending or raise taxes — and both cause problems for politicians and for voters. Voters are reluctant to pay more money to a government so often portrayed as inefficient and irresponsible. And politicians are afraid even to utter the “T-word” for fear that their opponents will brand them moneygrubbers and spendthrifts who don't deserve your vote.

Similar obstacles stand in the way of many proposals to cut government spending. Voter groups are predictably quite fond of programs that pay special attention to them and fight to keep their benefits in place when it's budget-cutting time. Their representatives in Washington, fearful of losing votes, support only those cuts they won't get an earful about back home.

Looking to force action on the deficit, the White House and Congress in 1990 reached an agreement raising certain taxes for higher-income Americans and “capping” federal spending in three categories — domestic, defense and international spending. Under the agreement, programs compete for the funds available for their category only. Critics charge that the agreement doesn't make sense because the “walls” between the categories won't

let us use the "peace dividend" from the end of the Cold War to meet urgent needs at home.

Policy makers have indeed made several attempts to lift the budget agreement. But the fact is that discretionary spending — the money lawmakers and the President have the authority to decide how to spend — is becoming a smaller and smaller portion of total government spending. Entitlements — money and services government is committed to deliver every year — are expected to cost more than \$700 billion in 1992, about half of the entire federal budget.

Entitlement programs include Social Security, Medicare — the government health program for the elderly and disabled — and Medicaid — the health program for the poor. Experts say we could save billions if we limited increases in entitlement spending. Among the options: taxing benefits more, reducing cost-of-living adjustments or "means testing" to limit how much we are spending on people who don't necessarily need the government's help.

So what's left for the economy after we pay for entitlements, interest on the national debt, the savings-and-loan bailout and other commitments? Not a lot of money for a lot of needs. Many candidates, for example, are calling for major new investments in the nation's infrastructure as a way to boost the economy and create jobs. Also sought: more aid for cities and new funds for education, job training and summer jobs.

Questions for Candidates:

- ★ Where do you think we should put the money we save from defense spending cuts — to reducing the deficit or to domestic needs such as education and jobs?
- ★ What's your plan for reducing the federal budget deficit and paying off our national debt? Where and by how much would you cut government spending?
- ★ What will you do to create jobs and spur economic growth?

Swallowing Now Taxes

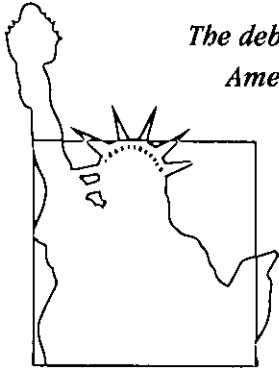
As much as we may hate to pay them, taxes are necessary to cover the costs of just about everything government does. And that's not all taxes can do. The tax code can be designed to favor the rich or the poor, to stimulate investment and savings, or even to discourage certain behavior — such as smoking, drinking or guzzling gas.

Advocates for the poor point out that some taxes are *regressive* — meaning they impose an unfair burden on low-income Americans. Sales taxes and excise taxes on such goods as gasoline and food are examples — the poorer the taxpayer, the more he or she pays as a percentage of income. The U.S. income tax — with rates at 15 percent, 28 percent and 31 percent, depending on income — is an example of a *progressive tax*.

So when the 1992 candidates propose wonderful-sounding new government programs, find out how they propose to pay for them. If they support new taxes, ask what kind of taxes. And if they say new taxes are out of the question, find out what they would cut to pay for their ideas. Because without new taxes, new ideas mean something's got to go.



SOCIAL POLICY AND WELFARE



The debate over the social services American society provides to the needy has taken a turn in recent years. With resources dwindling and with new emphasis on personal responsibility, social policy has focused not just on helping needy Americans get

by, but on helping them get up and out of poverty. A big obstacle to better benefits for the poor: many Americans are unwilling to commit hard-earned dollars to programs for people they feel should be supporting themselves.

THE ISSUES

It's called the "safety net," and it's what American society has built to protect the needy from the horrors of poverty and joblessness. Among the Americans it serves: 33 million who live in poverty; as many as 3 million who are homeless; and more than 20 million who will be unemployed at one time or another this year. A big problem is that the safety net is needed more in bad times than good — in times when government lacks the resources to pay for programs that can ease the pain.

When people say "welfare," it's a good bet they're talking about Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the federal government program created during the Depression to serve the poor. Currently, just over 5 percent of Americans — or 13 million people — receive cash benefits through AFDC. Joining AFDC in meeting the needs of the nation's poor are numerous programs that provide important services and support but not cash. These include food stamps, health care, housing subsidies and job training.

A lot of people have started to look at welfare and social policy issues through the eyes of the nation's children. If we aren't doing everything we can to help children succeed, they say, we are dooming them — and ourselves — to a future of even greater need. By 1990, more than one in five of America's kids lived in poverty. Conservative estimates put the number of American children who are homeless on any given night at 100,000.

Even for not-so-poor kids, such modern-day realities as broken families, single parents and two-earner households can often translate into trouble and neglect. Helping children at all income levels overcome hopelessness and boredom, many argue, is an investment in a stable and productive future for all Americans. The alternatives — more drugs, crime, violence and dependence — are in nobody's interest.

THE CHOICES

Critics of the American welfare system point to what they call a "cycle of dependency" that provides few incentives for people to work or get off welfare. As a result of these concerns, limited work requirements have been a part of the AFDC program since the 1960s, and a welfare reform law enacted in 1988 requires states to enroll 20 percent of welfare recipients in education or work programs by 1995.

Not good enough, say some critics. Welfare recipients, they argue, have certain obligations to society in exchange for the benefits they receive. Some states, for example, cut benefits if a parent has additional children or fails to keep a young child in school. Another welfare rule put in place by states: limits on how long an individual can receive assistance. But advocates for the poor argue that compassion also is needed. AFDC, they argue, reaches fewer than six in ten of the nation's poor children, and real benefits have declined by 27 percent over the last two decades. Together with food stamps,



Medicaid and housing subsidies, AFDC benefits fail to provide even a modestly secure standard of living for families with children. Advocates say that by providing better benefits — together with support services such as job training, transportation and child care — AFDC and other programs can ease the transition from welfare to work.

Many of the current proposals for new social policy reforms seek to ensure that parents have the resources they need to meet kids' needs. The proposals include: new tax credits for families with children; tougher child support enforcement to hold absent parents accountable for bringing up kids; improvements in the quality and availability of child care; and requirements that employers provide more flexible work arrangements and family leave benefits.

And to make sure that more children arrive in school "ready to learn," advocates have proposed full funding for Head Start, a popular and successful government program that provides early childhood education but only served one in three eligible children in 1991. According to researchers, one dollar spent now on preschool programs for kids will save nearly five dollars we would have to spend later on special education, law enforcement, welfare and other last-resort programs.

Housing is another area where people are saying government can do a better job to help poor families. Today, a new mortgage on an average house consumes more than 50 percent of a young family's income, up from 23 percent in 1973. The result is that many families live in overcrowded or substandard — and often dangerous — conditions, while others remain homeless or pay rents consuming as much as 70 percent of what they earn.

Welfare Quoons or Well-Meaning Citizens?

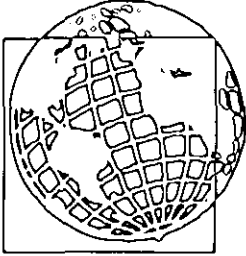
There are a lot of stereotypes about the nation's welfare recipients. A look at the numbers, however, shatters any notion that these are lazy people intent on draining the system. In 1988, for example, 40 percent of those in poverty earned wages, but not enough to pull them out of poverty. Also, more than seven in 10 of the nation's AFDC recipients have only one or two children, and fewer than 10 percent of the families have received AFDC benefits for more than a decade. Researchers say that compared to the benefits that middle- and upper-class Americans receive from government in the form of tax breaks, Social Security and Medicare, the benefits we provide for the poor are poor themselves.

Questions for Candidates

- ★ What will you do to provide additional income security for poor American families?
- ★ With housing costs out of reach for many Americans, what can government do to make sure that assistance and affordable housing are available?
- ★ Do you support full funding of Head Start? What other measures will you back to make American kids "ready to learn"?



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



With the melting of the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy is at a crossroads. In the past, as much as 70 percent of U.S. defense spending has been aimed at protecting against potential

threats from the Soviet Union. With those threats now greatly diminished, where should the United States focus its international attention?

THE ISSUES

Experts say that the concept of "national security" has been turned on its head in the past few years. No longer just a factor of how many weapons or how big an army a country has, national security today focuses more on the fact that we're all in this together as nations. With economic, environmental and military concerns crossing national borders more than ever before, "collective security" has become the new buzzword. As the Gulf War and this year's efforts to stop the bloodshed in Yugoslavia have shown, international cooperation may be the wave of the future.

On trade issues, for example, "common markets" are the trend, with nations in different regions around the world coming together to eliminate tariffs and trade barriers. In Europe, the South Pacific and North America, these "free-trade" proposals are touted as boosting individual nations' export opportunities while providing easier access to new and cheaper goods, services and materials. Standing in the way of the new arrangements are concerns in several nations, including the United States, about the loss of self-government and the extent to which jobs will be exported along with everything else.

On military issues, a chief international concern is the spread of dangerous weapons. Weapons transfers among nations are a multibillion-dollar international business. As a result, at least ten developing nations had or were working on nuclear weapons in 1990, and many more were at work on chemical or biological weapons. That's in addition to enormous stockpiles of weapons of all types in the United States and other industrialized countries.

The United States' current enemy, foreign policy experts argue, is not one nation or one group of nations but instability and chaos. The American economy — the world's largest importer and second largest exporter — can prosper only in a stable global system that allows economic growth, expansion of markets and access to world resources.

THE CHOICES

This year, President Bush proposed a 1992-97 defense budget topping \$1.6 trillion, a reduction of \$50 billion — or 3 percent — from the amount set out in the budget agreement signed by the White House and Congress in 1990. Pennies, argued the Administration's critics. Some experts have said that based on actual national security needs, 50-percent reductions in defense spending are feasible and that even 25-percent cuts are too cautious.

One area of potentially large defense savings is spending for U.S. troops stationed abroad. Currently, we have 245,000 troops in Europe alone. President Bush has proposed to cut that number by about 40 percent to 150,000. Others say we should cut troops further or tell allies in Europe and Asia that they should pay to keep us there.

What's needed, many point out, is a serious effort to determine exactly what the U.S. role in the post-Cold-War world should be. Once we know who we are, they say, then let's figure out how and where to



cut troops and spending. The Choices for the 21st Century Education Project at Brown University has laid out four options for U.S. foreign policy in the wake of the Cold War rivalry. They include:

“Standing Up for Human Rights and Democracy.” The United States uses military, economic and political resources to back governments that have good human rights records and the support of their people and to oppose those that don’t. Downside: calls for unilateral use of military force, sometimes in far corners of the globe.

“Charting a Stable Course.” As the world’s sole superpower, the United States maintains strong political, economic and military alliances with the aim of preventing aggression and economic disruption. Downside: to maintain stability, need may arise to support stable but undemocratic governments.

“Cooperating Globally.” Instead of attempting to police the world alone, the United States addresses global problems in cooperation with many other nations, vesting more power in international organizations. Downside: lose ability to act on the world stage without support of close allies and leading nations.

“Building Our Economic Strength.” The United States brings its troops home and cuts military and foreign-aid spending drastically while investing in the economy, reducing dependence on foreign oil and addressing other pressing national problems. Downside: lose influence and means to address global threats.

Immediate demands, however, won’t wait for the United States to make up its mind about the future. Negotiations with Mexico and Canada on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for example, are rapidly drawing to a close. Talks also are still under way on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which sets international rules on government subsidies for exports and other trade issues.

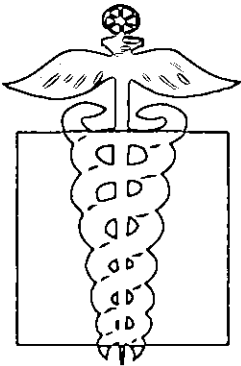
Also demanding immediate and sustained attention from our national leaders are global “hot spots” where ethnic and regional rivalries are simmering. Among the immediate options for making the world a safer place: increasing aid to the former countries of the Soviet Union and other emerging democracies, limiting nuclear weapons tests, and halting arms sales to nations in unstable regions.

Questions for Candidates

- ★ What’s your vision of the U.S. role in the post-Cold-War-world? What needs to happen in the coming years to make your vision a reality?
- ★ How much do you believe we can cut defense spending? What defense programs can we do without?
- ★ Regional fighting and weapons proliferation mean the world may be more dangerous now than during the Cold War. What will you do to make the planet a safer place?



HEALTH CARE



Health care is an issue that touches every American. Not only do we need to be sure that our hospitals and doctors are prepared to meet our needs, but we also need to know we can afford their services. Recent polls and elec-

tion results have shown that American voters are sick and tired of the U.S. health care system. Health care, we seem to be saying, is too expensive, too different for the haves and have-nots, and too complicated to understand.

THE ISSUES

The American health care system relies on a patchwork of “payers” — including individuals, employers and more than 1,500 private insurance companies. Another big health care payer is the government. The federal Medicare program, for example, covers 33 million elderly and disabled Americans. The Medicaid program — jointly funded by federal and state governments — targets health care services to the poor, including pregnant women and children.

How much are all these payers paying? As a nation, we’re spending \$1 out of every \$7 we earn on health care. Over the last three decades, increases in the amount we spend to stay healthy have consistently topped the inflation rate. And, if nothing is done to control costs, we could be spending \$1.6 trillion for health care by the year 2000 — \$14,000 per family per year.

All for what? If the true measure of a country’s health care system is the health and well-being of the people it serves, Americans are right to be calling for change. Women and children, it appears, suffer most. In 1991, 25 percent of pregnant

women in the United States did not receive timely, adequate prenatal care. The result: we ranked 23rd among the world’s nations in infant death rates, a shameful level by any measure.

The U.S. system, critics charge, is geared too much to treatment of problems and not enough to prevention, which in the long run costs less and results in a healthier America. Part of the reason for our focus on treatment is Americans’ shrinking access to needed health insurance and services. Because we can’t afford check-ups and preventive care, we don’t go to the doctor or the hospital until it’s an emergency. Today, between 31 and 37 million Americans have no health insurance at all, and as many as 50 million more are underinsured — without enough coverage to pay for the care and attention they may need. Most alarming: the uninsured include as many as 9 million children and 14 million women of childbearing age.

THE CHOICES

Many believe that the U.S. health care system needs a complete overhaul because it no longer meets our medical needs at an affordable price. Others argue that the flexibility and choice provided by the U.S. system are important to preserve and that less drastic change is called for. The one thing all reformers agree on: the need to control costs while expanding Americans’ access to health insurance and medical services.

In recent years, support has been building around three types of health care reform. These are:

“Play-or-Pay” Reforms. This proposal builds on the current system of employer-provided health benefits. Employers would have a choice: provide a basic package of health insurance to workers or pay taxes to fund a public insurance program that would extend coverage

to all Americans not covered at work. Supporters see "play-or-pay" as a solution that provides needed reform without radical change. Downside: potential new burdens on businesses.

"Single-Payer" Reforms. This proposal would establish a government-run program providing health coverage for all U.S. citizens. The single-payer system would be paid for by new taxes on citizens and businesses. Supporters say switching to a single payer from our complicated, multiple-payer system will make enormous savings available to cover everybody. Downside: budget-driven approach may cut into innovation and availability of services.

"Private Market-Based" Reforms. This proposal would keep the current system largely in place while encouraging more competition among health care providers and insurers. By making consumers and businesses more aware of what they're getting for their money, private reforms look to the market to cut costs and improve services while expanding government programs to cover the uninsured. Supporters say it's the American way. Downside: may not offer needed fundamental changes.

In the absence of far-reaching reforms, many are saying that federal and state governments should expand programs that provide health care services for "underserved" populations such as the poor, the elderly and the disabled. The federal Medicaid program, for example, reaches only a fraction of the nation's low-income population. And the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, which provides food and nutrition education to low-income women and their children, today serves an estimated 4 million Americans out of an eligible population of 7 million.

The Special Problem of Long-Term Care

America is "graying" every day. About 40 percent of Americans who turn 65 this year will need long-term nursing home care at some point in their lives. And they're not the only ones. Between 9 and 11 million Americans are chronically disabled or dependent on others for help with the basic tasks of living. Elderly and disabled Americans and their families often find that the costs of the care and attention they need dwarfs the amount their insurance policies will pay.

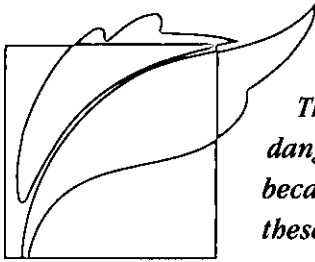
Many say we need a public policy guaranteeing coverage for long-term care for all Americans who need it. Make sure candidates for President and Congress figure long-term care into their health-care equations. Being disabled or dependent is hard enough. Find out what candidates would do to shield families and individuals from the staggering costs of long-term care.

Questions for Candidates

- ★ How do you propose we extend health care coverage to the more than 30 million Americans who are uninsured? How would you pay for the new coverage?
- ★ What will you do to keep health care cost increases more in line with inflation so we aren't paying \$14,000 per family per year for health care in the year 2000?
- ★ The U.S. infant mortality rate is a disgrace. How do you think we could move out of 23rd place in the world and closer to first?



THE ENVIRONMENT



The northern spotted owl. The snail darter. The sockeye salmon. In danger of extinction because of human activity, these animals have been waved like flags in the battle

for the country's environmental conscience. On one side are people who wonder whether we should hold up "progress" or jobs for uncertain science or for critters we could probably do without. On the other are people who say we can't have progress without a healthy environment — and that the two don't cancel each other out.

THE ISSUES

The battle entered the spotlight at the Earth Summit in Brazil in June. One of hundreds of nations there, the United States was criticized for refusing to go along with new requirements for reducing emissions of air pollutants linked to global warming. Also under fire: the United States' refusal to sign a treaty aimed at conserving plant and animal species. The stated reason for the U.S. position in Brazil? Concerns about the impact of the measures on jobs and businesses back home.

With the U.S. economy already on shaky ground, politicians have steered clear in recent years of new laws and regulations that businesses say will hurt them. Take global warming. Requiring new spending by industry to cut carbon dioxide emissions — the chief culprit in a possible future rise in the Earth's temperature, according to scientists — will cost jobs and profits, our government says. And all for science we aren't entirely sure of.

Environmentalists argue that such short-term thinking by government and business blinds us to new

opportunities and jobs that will come with keeping the environment clean. We're also blind, environmentalists say, to the long-term implications of not acting now. More than a year after we went to war in the Persian Gulf, they point out, we still don't have a long-term strategy to reduce our dependence on oil. By encouraging more conservation and by developing alternative fuels, the argument goes, we could ward off another crisis and protect the environment all at once.

Another area where environmentalists say we need to think about the future is in how we produce and handle wastes. Today we throw away 180 million tons of garbage every year — more than 1,400 pounds per person — together with 500 million tons of hazardous wastes. Just figuring out how to get rid of it all is no longer enough, especially with health and safety concerns making new landfills and burners tougher to site.

THE CHOICES

"The Economy vs. The Environment." The way some people talk about it, it's a war that only one side can win. Others, however, say it's possible for both the environment and the economy to be healthy — and that choosing one or the other won't cut it. What's needed are answers to searching questions about the risks we'll accept and the prices we're willing to pay on our way to a healthy and prosperous future.

On the issue of global warming, for example, opponents of new requirements on industry say the risks to our economy are too great. Environmentalists counter that the risks of not acting now are even greater — and that cutting emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollution caused by burning fossil fuels will pay off whether or not the predictions of a warmer climate are true.

We need to kick the oil habit, environmentalists say. With transportation accounting for two-thirds of U.S. petroleum use, experts say the best way to kick the habit is through new gas taxes that would discourage guzzling and spark interest in alternative fuels. Gas prices should be higher anyway, say some, to reflect the true price we pay — in environmental clean-up and military commitments — to keep the oil spigot on. Nevertheless, recent government efforts to increase gas taxes and toughen fuel-efficiency standards for cars have failed. The reason? Worries about protests from voters and industry.

Conservation and increased energy efficiency are other ways to lessen U.S. dependence on fossil fuels such as oil and coal. Environmentalists also say we need to do a better job researching and developing fuels that are renewable and don't pollute. These alternative fuels — solar, hydro, and wind power — aren't the only energy sources with hard-core fans: natural gas and nuclear power (see sidebar) also are being cheered as cleaner and smarter than oil and coal.

On other environmental issues, people are saying that government needs to wake up to the waste problem by encouraging recycling and "pollution prevention" — stopping the production of wastes in the first place. And with seafood advisories, closed beach areas and lost wetlands all in the news in recent years, environmentalists say it's time to put new teeth in government efforts to keep our water resources safe and clean.

Questions for Candidates

- ★ Do you believe we should do everything we can to prevent global warming? What should we do?
- ★ What will you do to strengthen our national energy strategy and reduce U.S. dependence on oil?
- ★ Do you agree with environmentalists that we may be facing a waste crisis in the future? If so, what can we do about it?

The Nuclear Question

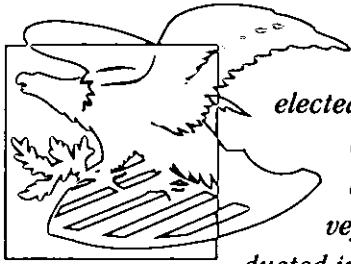
With all the current concern about carbon dioxide and other pollution caused by burning fossil fuels, nuclear power is again in the spotlight. With no air pollution to speak of, nuclear plants currently supply about 20 percent of all U.S. electricity. Increasing that percentage, many people are saying, is one way to cut U.S. contributions to global warming while reducing our dependence on oil.

But many politicians and voters in the United States are still scared to put away their "No Nukes" signs. That's despite new and safer technologies and warm embraces of nuclear power in recent years by other countries such as France and Japan.

Concerns about the safety of the power plants aren't the only obstacle in the way of nuclear power's U.S. comeback. Disposing of nuclear waste — which takes hundreds of thousands of years to lose its radioactivity — poses a big challenge in this age of NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) politics.



POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT



The American public's esteem for its elected officials and political institutions is at a low. A major survey of Americans conducted in 1990 by the Times

Mirror Center for the People and the Press provided a snapshot of voter feeling in the country. A big majority of those surveyed — 78 percent — said they feel that elected officials in Washington often lose touch with the public; a smaller majority — 57 percent — said that people like themselves have no say in what our government does.

THE ISSUES

A lot of people pin Americans' feeling of distance from their leaders in Washington on a system that puts raising money above representing voters on a politician's list of things to do. The cost of campaigning for federal office has skyrocketed in recent years. Spending for 1988 congressional campaigns (House and Senate) totaled \$458 million, with the average Senate seat going for \$3.7 million. According to reform advocates, the high cost of running for office — and winning — scares off potential challengers and stifles competition and debate.

The need for cash also opens the door to contributions from special interests — corporations, trade associations, interest groups and others with big stakes in what government does. To shore up their lobbying efforts in Washington, special interests set up Political Action Committees (PACs) that raise money and spend it on candidates and campaigns. In 1988, PAC contributions accounted for more than a third of total campaign receipts in House and

Senate races — with 75 cents of every PAC dollar going to incumbents. Critics say PAC contributions leave elected officials accountable not to voters but to whomever writes the biggest checks.

When asked about voting in the Times Mirror survey, nearly three in four Americans said that elections give them "some say" in what goes on in government. Barely half of all eligible voters went to the polls in the last presidential election, however, and less than 40 percent turned out in 1990. Part of the reason for all the no-shows, many feel, is the hassle of registering to vote in this country. Among the obstacles between voters and the ballot box: hard-to-find places to register, inconvenient hours, procedures that discriminate against certain groups, and deadlines that pass before the campaigns even get interesting.

THE CHOICES

Earlier this year, the House and Senate passed a bill aimed at changing the way we pay for congressional races. The President ultimately vetoed the campaign finance bill, saying he could not stomach two of its prime parts: voluntary limits on campaign spending and public financing for congressional elections.

Spending limits have long been a controversial component of efforts to reform how we pay for political campaigns in this country. With mandatory limits considered a violation of candidates' constitutional rights, voluntary caps have gained favor as a way to keep spending down by offering incentives such as federal matching funds to candidates who stay within the limits.

But using public funds for congressional races is equally controversial. While opponents see it as an unnecessary draw on taxpayer dollars, supporters say public financing is a small price to pay for a more representative government. Already used in



presidential elections, public financing of campaigns is touted as a way to limit the need for special interest dollars and to create a level playing field for challengers.

To increase voter participation in elections, people are saying we need to open up the registration process. One way to open it up, they say, is to do what already works in several states: allow citizens to register to vote when applying for or renewing their driver's licenses or nondriver's IDs. Other state-tested options: providing registration by mail and at other government agencies, including welfare and unemployment offices; and allowing people to register on election day.

Opponents of voter-registration changes cite costs, states' rights and the potential for fraud as reasons to be wary. Supporters call these complaints cover for officeholders' fears of the political uncertainty that would come with more new voters. Once people are registered, supporters of registration reforms point out, 80 to 90 percent of them vote.

In search of still more ways to bring people back to government and government back to people, policy makers are talking about everything from targeting special-interest lobbying to cleaning up political campaigns. But candidates don't have to wait until after the election to show their commitment to citizen participation and representative government. By running substantive and informative campaigns, they can point the way right now to politics and government that work.

Questions for Candidates

- ★ What reforms would you support to make running for and holding federal office less of a money chase?
- ★ How do you propose we work to increase voter turnout in this country from the dismal levels of recent elections?
- ★ Why do you think American voters are feeling more and more detached from government? What would you do to welcome them back to politics?

You Mean I'm Not Really Deciding?

It's easy to forget that when American voters go to the polls, they aren't actually voting for a candidate but for people pledged to that candidate in the electoral college. If no candidate receives a majority of the electoral college vote, the power to pick the President goes to the House of Representatives.

The system, say many observers, is obsolete and undemocratic and only aggravates the problem of citizens feeling their votes don't count. Bills to abolish the electoral college have been considered numerous times by Congress. If we elected the President solely on the basis of the popular vote, their supporters say, he or she would have a direct mandate from the people — and voters might feel a little better about their say in where the nation's headed.

Just ask Grover Cleveland, who won the popular vote in 1888 but lost the election. Benjamin Harrison, it turned out, received more electoral votes and became President.



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