

Gary Hart

Folder Citation: Collection: Records of the 1976 Campaign Committee to Elect Jimmy Carter;
Series: Noel Sterrett Subject File; Folder: Gary Hart; Container 84

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NOV. 3, 1974

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Big Majority Of Big Spenders?

DENVER—"We are not a bunch of little Hubert Humphreys."

That comment by the likely Democratic winner of the 1974 Colorado Senate race, former McGovern campaign manager Gary Hart, may be the most important advice to keep in mind when reading Tuesday's election returns.

When the Democratic victories—like Hart's expected win over Sen. Peter H. Dominick (R)—come rolling in, the tendency will be to compare the new Congress to those elected in the previous Democratic landslide years of 1964, 1958 or even the early New Deal years.

Each time in the past when Democratic majorities in the House and Senate approached the two-thirds margin, the result has been the passage of a spate of social legislation. Social security, minimum wage, federal aid to education, Medicare and a hundred other programs resulted from elections like the one that is likely to occur this year.

So logic would seem to dictate the same equation: Big Democratic majorities equal big new federal programs.

The guess here is that forecast will prove wrong.

For one thing, to pass big social programs, the Democrats have always needed not only swollen congressional majorities but control of the White House. That they will not have. Unless they suddenly convert Jerry Ford into a big-spending programmatic liberal, which he has never been, the congressional Democrats will find that the more activist they become, the more presidential vetoes they will draw.

Following the 1958 election, when they had their last big off-year victory, the Democrats produced a slew of social and economic proposals. These programs formed the platform of the Kennedy campaign and eventually found their way into law in the 1960s.

But the history is worth recalling. In 1959 and 1960, Democrats had 282 seats in the House and 64 in the Senate, just about what people are predicting for the new Congress. Their new social programs drew down 44 vetoes from President Eisenhower.

And that supposedly "veto-proof" Congress was able to override the Eisenhower vetoes only twice.

The lesson is plain. Democrats need their own President to pass significant social programs. But there is a deeper reason to doubt that the next two years will see a surge of new federal programs. That is that the country is still in an essentially conservative political mood. The voters are expressing their distaste for Republican scandals and economic mismanagement; they are not begging for a return to the Great Society days.

On the contrary, the glut of legislation Lyndon Johnson shoved through Congress in 1965 and 1966 consumed almost everyone's appetite for more federal programs. The eight years since then have produced a growing skepticism about the ability of government to manage such programs.

Democrats running for Congress this year are aware of that distaste for big government—and most of those who do have a chance to be elected have adapted their rhetoric accordingly. As Congressional Quarterly pointed out in a recent roundup, Kansas Senate candidate William R. Roy (D) brags that in the House "I have never voted for spending bills in excess of tax revenues," and Arkansas Senate candidate Dale Bumpers (D) says that "I see no reason why the United States government can't operate on the same basis that the state of Arkansas does, and that is that you just don't spend more than you take in."

The only big new federal program that seems to command broad popular support is national health insurance. And this fall one could hear strong criticism of the "vast, unnecessary bureaucracy" embodied in the Kennedy health bill, not only from Republicans but from Utah Democratic senatorial candidate Wayne Owens, who happens to be Ted Kennedy's former staff assistant.

Ken
7-17-74