



Daniel A. Smith. *Tax Crusaders and the Politics of Direct Democracy.* New York and London: Routledge, 1998. xiv + 249 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-91991-3.



Reviewed by John M. Allswang (California State University, Los Angeles)

Published on H-Pol (November, 1998)

One mark of scholarly maturity is the ability to write a book or journal article without making the argument that everyone who has written on the topic previously had it all wrong. By that calculus, Prof. Smith (a political scientist at the University of Denver) has a way to go. His interesting analysis of the initiative-based “tax revolt” that started with Proposition 13 in California in 1978, makes a contribution to understanding the phenomenon. But it is neither as original nor as convincing as the author believes.

Smith’s thesis calls the “conventional wisdom,” the idea, that this tax revolt was a mass-based popular movement, wrong. Rather Smith deduces, the forces behind these initiatives were not “populist” but were in fact what he calls “*faux* populist,” powered by special interests. Scholars, as well as activists, have misunderstood this, he says, and confused mass support for these measures at the polls for mass support in their origins and direction. They have also misperceived direct legislation as being innately more democratic than the representative process.

Prof. Smith’s argument that special interests, rather than “the people,” played the key role in the success of these initiatives, is right to a considerable degree. But not to the degree that he thinks. And his idea that this phenomenon has gone largely unnoticed is simply wrong.

Nonetheless, the book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of both the tax revolt and the contemporary initiative process.

The books’ first two chapters briefly discuss the development of direct legislation and the tradition of American anti-tax sentiment going back to the Revolutionary War era. Smith is correct in that such a tradition has existed in American history, and that Howard Jarvis in California in 1978 was by no means a new phenomenon. This analysis provides a good background for subsequent chapters, but, once having introduced the topic, Prof. Smith might have been more inclusive rather than jumping over the 180 or so years from Shays’ Rebellion to Howard Jarvis. His history has some holes in it. (Also, while we all make careless mistakes in our writings, his substitution of “Wendell T. Holmes” for Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. [pp. 25, 243] has to give historians pause.)

The most controversial part of Prof. Smith’s book, particularly from a historical viewpoint, is his chapter on “Populist and *Faux* Populist Moments.” This is important to him, since his ultimate argument is that the modern anti-tax initiatives were not really populist. But his extensive effort to analyze the literature on populism comes up against the fact that historians continue to be quite divided on what, in fact, it was or is. Indeed, Smith

himself notes that “the concept has lost much of its analytic precision (p. 41).” His definition of *faux* populism is “a populist sounding message without the political mobilization of the people (p. 48).” But the distinction is not so easy as he might wish, and he demonstrates this by underestimating the role of leadership in the populism of the late 19th century. Thus his conclusion that Howard Jarvis “ushered in this era of *faux* populist moments” is based on a distinction that some readers will find not entirely persuasive. Also, his use of “moment” rather than “movement” or some other more conventional usage serves some purpose I do not understand.

The substantive heart of Smith’s book consists of the next three chapters, which analyze three major tax-cutting initiatives: Proposition 13 in California in 1978, Proposition 2 1/2 in Massachusetts in 1980, and Amendment 1 in Colorado in 1992. These chapters are well-researched and provide comprehensive pictures of the dynamics of each of the movements leading to these successful initiatives. But even his own information does not necessarily support his thesis about *faux* populism, which is precisely his conclusion for each of these initiatives. In Colorado, for example, which chapter Smith titles “A Solo Crusade,” Douglas Bruce pursued this issue for years, almost alone. His may be a case that is neither populist nor *faux* populist, but a reflection of what one determined and rich person can get going in American politics. One way or another, Bruce did get a majority behind him, including business interests.

Smith misses some aspects of the Jarvis and Gann campaign in 1978. For example, they gathered over one million signatures to put Proposition 13 on the ballot, more than double what was needed, and most by volunteer effort. Also, “Yes on 13,” the main fund-raising body for the initiative, received over eleven thousand contributions, almost half of them under fifty dollars. This does not disprove the fact that there were real economic interests involved in this campaign, as Smith shows, but it

suggests that mass involvement was a significant part of this movement.

Smith’s conclusion about Proposition 13 is confusing. He does not so much argue that big economic interests were behind Proposition 13, but rather that “Jarvis, acting as a populist entrepreneur, tapped Californians’ amorphous anger toward... taxes and... state and local governments (p. 83).” That is almost a refutation of his own thesis, and also almost suggests that when a leader is involved a movement is *ipso facto* no longer populist. That is a serious misreading of the history of populism.

Prof. Smith is quite correct in arguing that mass support of a direct legislation measure does not necessarily mean that it arose from the masses. Indeed, a majority can indeed be fooled by special interests into supporting initiatives that help those interests more than themselves. My own study of California initiatives suggests similar conclusions. And in Jarvis and Gann’s careers after 1978 we can see more and more the existence of special interests behind their apparent leadership.

In the final analysis, however, Prof. Smith overstates his thesis and does not provide convincing proof of its validity. And he oversimplifies history in coming to a too-facile conclusion about what is populist and what is not. His distinction about “*faux* populism” may have seemed a good idea at first, but it does not really work, in that almost anything smacking of leadership or of money can be declared as *faux* rather than real.

We end up with an interesting study that provides a lot of information about contemporary direct legislation and the tax reform movement. What we don’t have is a persuasive argument that explains these things beyond what has already been written.

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Citation: John M. Allswang. Review of Smith, Daniel A., *Tax Crusaders and the Politics of Direct Democracy*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

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