POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Rise of the 'Safe' District

"On the Decline of Competition in Congressional Elections" by John A. Ferejohn, in *The American Political Science Review* (Mar. 1977), 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

There has been a marked decline in competition for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives since the mid-1950s. Some observers claim that the so-called "marginal" districts have vanished due to redistricting; others suggest that incumbents edge out challengers because of their increased ability to communicate with constituents. But Ferejohn, a political scientist at the California Institute of Technology, argues instead that voter behavior has changed.

Rejecting the redistricting argument, Ferejohn shows that similar declines in competition have taken place in unredistricted congressional districts. In a review of non-Southern states, for example, he finds that the number of "competitive" seats (winner received less than 60 percent of the vote) in redistricted districts dropped from 51 in 1962 to 40 in 1966; during the same period, competitive seats in unredistricted districts dropped from 51 to 28.

Ferejohn suggests that there has been a decline in the electorate's "party identifiers"—citizens whose votes are determined by a candidate's party affiliation. Many party identifiers "are behaving more like Independents." However, "issue voting" has not markedly increased. Instead, it appears that "incumbency voting" has replaced party voting as a kind of "shorthand cue" in the voting booth. (Such voter rules of thumb are common in "low-information" congressional elections.) One effect is to reduce the number of competitive seats.

The Social Costs of Urban Renewal

"What Happened to Urban Renewal?" by Bruce L. Jaffee, in *Business Horizons* (Feb. 1977), Graduate School of Business, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind. 47401.

Between 1950 and 1974, 76 percent of federal grants for urban renewal projects were for construction. By the end of this 25-year program, roughly half of the 2,102 construction projects had been completed; more housing units had been demolished than constructed, and seven states had received more than half of the $10 billion in total federal assistance. What has been the lasting effect?

One of the major goals of the 1949 National Housing Act (the major urban renewal legislation), says Jaffee, professor of business at Indiana University, was "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family." But he reports that under urban renewal low-income families were forced out of central city slums and thus had to compete for a reduced supply of low-cost housing elsewhere. Few could afford to return to the "redeveloped" neighborhoods.

However, urban renewal *did* increase the market value of urban land. In renewal areas, the tax base increased by an estimated average of 213 percent after completion of the federally aided projects—apartments, office buildings, and shopping malls, for instance. Land was frequently bought up by local urban renewal agencies for more than its market value, benefiting downtown real estate owners in and near renewal areas. Jaffee questions the use of such federal outlays for correcting "inefficiencies" in the urban land market, especially when the benefits accrue only to the local economy. He also criticizes excessive use of federal funds for construction of government-owned buildings. Of the total land value of all urban renewal projects completed by the end of 1973, only 47 percent represented taxable property.

The Politics of Wealth

"Who Rules America? Power and Politics in the Democratic Era, 1825–1975" by Edward Pessen, in *Prologue* (Spring 1977), National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408.

For the past 150 years, the myth of the "self-made man" has proclaimed America a land of plenty, where every ambitious and hardworking person could achieve material success.

Historical realism, however, suggests that this has not been the case, says CUNY historian Pessen. In fact, the growth of political democracy in the United States has done little to better prevailing conditions of "gross social and economic inequality."

During the latter half of the 19th century maldistribution of wealth (real or personal property) was such that more than 50 percent of the people in 10 major U.S. cities owned no wealth whatever; the richest 10 percent owned about 80 percent of the wealth. By 1920, America's wealthiest 1 percent still owned about 35 percent of the wealth when measured by families, and approximately 31 percent when measured by individuals. By 1966, one-half of 1 percent of all "consumer units" held 22 percent of the wealth.

The fact that great inequities persisted despite the broadening of suffrage raises a number of unanswered questions. Was the politicians' failure to change things due to an indifferent or powerless electorate? Were elected officials unconcerned, elitist, or lacking in power?

The American masses, says Pessen, appear never to have sought a political solution to the problem of economic inequality. Their elected leaders behaved *politically* as if they themselves were well off, whether they were or not. The evidence does not point to development of a "ruling class" that monopolized political power. What it does suggest is that, for as yet unexplained reasons, political power has not been used by the shifting groups and interests that have possessed it "to tamper with the social and economic order and the pervasive inequalities that characterize that order."