

A New Age of Reform

By DANIEL HENNINGER



With incumbents toppling and party establishments cracking, there is talk of November being a

“reform” election. Don’t be fooled: There is political reform and there is Political Reform. Political reform with a small “r” comes and goes on tiny politicians’ feet.

Big-R Reform changes the nation.

The aim of small “r” reform is to slow or kill Big-R Reform.

When Andrew Cuomo announces his candidacy for New York governor with an attack on Albany, that is small-r reform. (We’ll know he is getting serious if he compliments the real Reforms being sought in neighboring New Jersey by Republican Gov. Chris Christie.) When President Obama proposes, as he did this week, some version of the line-item veto, that is small-r reform.

But make no mistake: When, almost at once, a spender like Barack Obama asks for the presidential power to veto individual spending items, when an Andrew Cuomo promises to cap taxes (albeit at one of the nation’s already highest levels) and cut spending, when voters are chopping down incumbent redwoods such as Sen. Bob Bennett in Republican Utah and Rep. Alan Mollohan in Democratic West Virginia, and when the Republican establishment’s candidates are routed by a Rand Paul, it is possible to imagine that the

American voter is itching for a new age of reform. The mood one senses out in the country is not about tidying up politics. It is instead about reforming the way this nation thinks about its purpose.

When the history of this Reform is written, the event that ignited it may be the Obama health-care plan. The year spent with that legislation caused something to snap in American politics.

ObamaCare touched live cables buried beneath the political roadbed. Amid a deep recession, it was very expensive, and its cost required an array of new taxes and fees. Normally the trillion-dollar price tag might have rolled past a

public numbed to spending numbers. This came right after the nearly trillion-dollar stimulus bill, itself a cats-and-dogs heave of taxpayer cash. The health-care celebration was followed by passage of a \$3.8 trillion federal budget claiming nearly 25% of GDP.

Just off center stage, the fiscal catastrophe in the states played on. The public could watch once-wonderful California (whose deficit is now \$19 billion) issuing IOUs in place of tax refunds.

For the Reform-minded, the issue clarified: The question is not just “deficits” and fiscal reconciliation, but whether the nation’s people work to support the state, or as originally, to build their lives.

There was the unseemly and irresponsible manner in which Congress legislated health care, the famously unread 2,000 page entitlement. The Republicans chose not to participate, but they had contributed to (arguably began) the agitation for Reform with an earlier reputation-destroying spending binge.

The pull to Reform is coming from the right. Rand Paul, Sarah Palin, the tea party, Massachusetts’ January disavowal of the Kennedy legacy—all suggest scales tipping rightward. Rightward, however, is not the same thing as right-wing.

Those who cite Palin and Paul as evidence that this is just another “anti-government” spasm from the political right miss stronger currents running through the electorate.

Recall the Pew poll that put trust in government at 22%. The approval rating for Congress is 23%. You need more than a tea party to get numbers like that.

I would argue that the Reform wave building in the land is not anti-government, but *pro*-government. When people call themselves Americans, Californians, New Yorkers, Illinoisans, Texans or, yes, New Jerseyans, they aren’t just talking about a place name, but a fought-for legal entity with a grand political history. Albany, Sacramento, Springfield, Trenton and Washington, D.C., do not reflect governance but mis-govern-

nance. Reformers want the former.

Political corruption and social crusades propelled earlier Reforms. The drivers of this one appear to be economic balance and political competition.

The tea partiers’ concerns are almost mostly economic, the sense that the scale of government has tipped beyond anything normal to the American experience. So yes, a presidential line-item veto would be on any Reform list. So would tax simplicity.

A Reform movement seeking better politicians would have at least two other goals. Reform the gerrymandering of Congressional and state legislative districts. This is a main cause of California’s and New York’s crises. And abandon the archaic McCain-Feingold campaign-finance limits, which are keeping good candidates out of politics.

It’s hard to see the leftward end of the Democratic Party participating in the new age of Reform. They caused it to come to life. Their incumbent for 2012 has quickly become an icon of the Gilded Age of Government. But many Democrats not literally in thrall to state financial support must surely be ready to change direction.

Whether a leader will emerge by 2012 to make the Reform’s goals clear and compelling is a good question. The White House assumes it will not happen. But if not, expect endless tumult.

