

Nuclear Initiatives: Two Sides Disagree on Meaning of Defeat

The nuclear industry is hoping that the defeat of nuclear safety initiatives in six western and midwestern states on 2 November, together with the defeat of a similar initiative in California last June, will be interpreted by government policy-makers as a popular mandate to push rapidly ahead with nuclear power. And, in particular, the industry hopes that president-elect Jimmy Carter, whose support for nuclear power has been tepid and cautious at best, will now look on this energy source more positively.

Sponsors and supporters of the nuclear initiatives—which not only lost but lost overwhelmingly (their best showing was in Oregon, where the initiative got 43 percent of the vote)—do not have much to be cheerful about. But some of them, too, see in the outcome of the elections some positive lessons. These lessons point not to an abandonment of state initiative campaigns as a weapon, but to a marked change of strategy as to the best use of that weapon.

Herbert Epstein, coordinator of citizens action for Critical Mass (a Washington-based group established by Ralph Nadar), is frankly critical of past ballot proposals and believes that the best bet now would be to focus narrowly on economic issues, such as those related to the very high capital cost of nuclear power and on those safety issues related to the disposal of nuclear wastes. In this regard, he takes comfort in the outcome of a utility rate reform initiative in Missouri and of local plebiscites in northern Michigan on radioactive waste disposal. Also, Epstein sees much promise in initiatives that would focus positively on energy conservation and on such energy alternatives as solar heating and cooling or wind-generated electricity.

It is now clear that voters are not buying the kind of nuclear initiative which was just offered in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington. Although differing in some respects, the initiatives in these six states were similar in that all would have made construction of nuclear plants subject to legislative certification with respect to adequacy of reactor core safety systems and of waste disposal systems. And, except in Arizona and Montana,

the certification would have had to be by a two-thirds vote in each chamber. Further, the initiatives in all the states would have required any utility wishing to build a nuclear plant to agree to accept full liability for damages in the event of an accident, thus waiving its rights under the limited-liability provisions of the Price-Anderson Act.

Except for the Arizona measure, these initiatives would not have applied to nuclear projects already under way—and, in this, they departed from the California initiative, which provided for a gradual phasing out of existing nuclear plants unless all safety and liability standards were met. Nevertheless, the nuclear and utility industries labeled them all as measures deviously designed to “ban” nuclear power.

The successful and largely industry-financed campaigns to defeat the initiatives featured a media blitz in the final weeks preceding the election which sponsors of the initiative could not possibly match. In Colorado, industry campaign spending by the anti-initiative forces exceeded \$400,000; in Washington, it exceeded \$850,000; and, in Oregon, it may well total as much as \$1 million, or about a dollar for every Oregonian who voted. The pro-initiative forces were outspent by a ratio of from 4 to 1 to as much as 8 to 1 or greater.

“Checkbook Politics”

Although he never took a position on the nuclear initiative, Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado noted sourly the morning after the election that more than \$1.5 million, most of it from corporate sources, had been spent to successfully defeat this initiative and three other ballot proposals—for tax reform, consumer advocacy, and a nonreturnable bottle ban. Lamm called it “checkbook politics,” and spoke of a need for the legislature to restrict campaign spending from corporate sources.

Spokesmen for the nuclear initiative forces tend to dismiss the defeat of the initiatives by saying that the nuclear industry and the utilities simply “bought” the election with their costly media campaigns. There appears to be some truth in this, but it is not the whole truth.

Labor and business groups, engineering and scientific associations, and a good many state and local politicians and officials were on record as opposing the initiatives. Also, the press generally took strong editorial positions against them.

In Colorado, even the *Straight Creek Journal*—a kind of counter-culture or “alternative” newspaper—joined the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* in coming out against the Colorado nuclear safeguards amendment. The *Journal* said, in part, that sponsors of the amendment had failed to address the “existential dilemma” by showing convincingly that the hazards associated with nuclear power are greater than those associated with other energy alternatives, such as coal. Also, the *Journal* took the view that, in execution, the amendment would give rise to far too much confusion and complexity to be acceptable.

In truth, the view that the initiatives have been too broad in reach and too complicated in detail to be politically saleable now seems to be shared by at least a few people who have been pushing them. Certainly, this is true of Epstein, of Critical Mass. “The California initiative was a monstrosity,” he told *Science*. “The second generation [a reference to the six just defeated] was better, but they were still very complex.”

In his opinion, what is called for now is a third generation of initiatives which would, as noted earlier, focus narrowly on the economics of nuclear power, on waste disposal problems, and on positive energy alternatives such as conservation and solar power. Epstein refers to events in Missouri and Michigan as cases in point.

In Missouri, there was no nuclear initiative as such on the November 2 ballot but there was a utility rate reform initiative that could affect present and future plans for nuclear as well as nonnuclear energy development. This initiative, which was approved by a 62 percent majority, makes it impossible for the Union Electric Company to bill ratepayers for the interest it owes on construction work in progress.

Prior to the initiative’s passage, Union Electric indicated that the measure could result in delay or curtailment of its \$1.8-billion project to build two big nuclear units in Calloway County. Some of the groups that supported the rate reform initiative—the Missouri Public Interest Research Group, the Coalition for the Environment, and the Utility Consumers Council—have tried unsuccessfully to prevent issuance of a construction permit for the first of these units.

In Michigan, the voters in Alpena and Charlevoix counties, which are situated in the northern part of the lower peninsula, responded with a resounding "no" to the question whether the disposal of nuclear wastes should be allowed in their region. This nonbinding advisory referendum question was included on the November ballot after it came to light several months ago that the Energy Research and Development Administration was planning some test drilling into the thick salt deposit that underlies Michigan. The Alpena Power Company mounted a feeble campaign in favor of keeping the waste disposal option open, but it found few takers.

The Michigan electorate as a whole would have had a chance to vote on an

initiative similar to those rejected by voters in the other six states except for the fact that not enough signatures were collected for this initiative to qualify for a place on the ballot. The some 100,000 signatures which this initiative's sponsor, the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan (PIRGM), did collect could still be counted against the total that would be required to bring it to a vote in November 1978. But some of the PIRGM leaders are now wondering whether the better course would not be simply to abandon this effort and start afresh, perhaps along the lines Epstein is suggesting.

The Atomic Industrial Forum (AIF), an industry association that has more than 600 corporate and institutional mem-

bers, is promoting the idea that the voting this year on the nuclear initiatives has amounted to a large and unique plebiscite involving some 20 percent of the total national electorate. Carl Walske, president of the AIF, says the nuclear issue "has been taken to the Village Square, as Einstein predicted, and has been approved by the American voter."

Another well-placed industry observer puts it this way: "We are hoping that there is a message here for the new Administration." In a speech last August at Oak Ridge, Jimmy Carter said he did not favor a nuclear moratorium. But last spring in Portland, Carter endorsed the Oregon initiative, and he has often stressed the need for nuclear safeguards.—LUTHER J. CARTER

Congress: Election Impacts Atomic Energy, Science Committees

When the new Congress convenes in January, the Senate is expected to move to make changes in its committee structure, and a leading candidate for oblivion is the once-unassailable Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

In Congress at large, a combination of retirements and defeats in the primaries and the general election have created a situation in the committees which deal with science and energy policy rather like a complicated game of musical chairs in which the players have been removed rather than the chairs.

Since the Atomic Energy Commission was fissioned into the new Energy Research and Development Administration and Nuclear Regulatory Agency there has been considerable speculation that the JCAE's days are numbered.

A proposal to remove the legislative authority of all joint committees was made by Democrats in the House 2 years ago as part of a package of committee reforms, but was not included in the changes which were finally instituted. In the last Congress, Representatives Johnathan B. Bingham (D-N.Y.) and Clarence D. Long (D-Md.) continued the effort, but singled out the JCAE.

The Senate has been regarded as the chief proponent and defender of the JCAE because several influential Senate members of the committee—there are

nine members from each house—have been particularly staunch advocates of nuclear energy.

This year, however, a select committee which is studying the Senate committee structure (*Science*, 14 May) recommended that the functions of all joint committees be "reconsolidated" into standing committees. This, of course, would include the JCAE.

In practical terms, Senate support for the JCAE has been substantially reduced by the departure from the Senate of five of the nine Senate members. This includes the chairman, the retiring Senator John O. Pastore (D-R.I.), who has been a strong partisan of development of nuclear power. Other departing members are Senator Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), who is also retiring, and Senators Joseph M. Montoya (D-N.M.), James L. Buckley (C-R-N.Y.), and John V. Tunney (D-Calif.), all of whom were defeated in the general election.

Senator Henry M. Jackson who was resoundingly reelected will be the ranking Democrat on the JCAE in the new Congress. Jackson has been a strong proponent of the committee as well as of nuclear energy. But whether Jackson would be inclined to lead a campaign to save the JCAE now seems doubtful. He reportedly has come to feel in recent years that the handwriting is on the wall

for the JCAE. The select committee's recommendations provide that military applications of nuclear energy would be taken over by the Armed Services Committee, where Jackson is a senior member, and this well might be to his liking. In addition, Jackson's interest in energy matters has broadened and the JCAE in some way restricts him in that interest.

The JCAE, however, can be expected to have its champions, notably members from the House, who will be returning en masse. Most solicitous for the committee is likely to be John Young (D-Tex.) who stands to take over as chairman under the arrangement which provides for the JCAE chairmanship's shifting between House and Senate in alternate congresses. Opinion in the House, however, is said to be running against the JCAE, particularly among younger members who feel that the committee has, historically, been too partial to the nuclear industry.

The implications of the election, of course, go beyond the JCAE. This election, in fact, will have an unusually strong impact on legislators who played key roles in science policy and energy matters.

On the Senate side, Senator Frank E. Moss (D-Utah) was unseated in the general election. Moss has been chairman of the Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences and was the only incumbent Senate committee chairman to be defeated. The Senate space committee has been underemployed since the space program went into decline and, under Moss's chairmanship, efforts have been made to widen its interests and jurisdiction. Science policy was one area where the committee already had a foot-