

Disconnect (ed): Part 2

By Ward La Valley / February 8, 2016

In Part 1 of Disconnect(ed) we were able to define a group of voters in Calaveras County – a large majority group of voters. This majority is older, retired or semi-retired, and lives in their own single-family home. It has enough in common to beg an important question: what do they (the majority) want, and are they getting it? In this Part 2 we will confine ourselves to the first question.

Right off the bat, it might occur to someone that, by definition, the majority IS getting what it wants, and what it wants is what we got. That's what happens in a democracy.

To the extent this argument feels tautological we break loose from the circle by adding the words “reasonable” or “logical” when speculating about what the agenda of the majority might be. So the question becomes, *if the majority was rational*, what sorts of policies would they want?

Before grappling with what that might mean, we can make the job easier by confining our focus strictly to issues relevant to County government in Calaveras County. Any issue that is not within the range of the actual duties of County Supervisors is beyond our scope. So while the majority might have strong opinions on some issue related to, say, foreign policy, we don't have to worry about defining what they might be.

We now come to what is meant by rational. Since we are being strictly Calaveras-specific, the question devolves to, *given the common characteristics of the majority in Calaveras County, what characteristics of Calaveras County policies would be the most rational for that majority?*

For us, our definition of rationality begins with a frank admission that it is irrational to expect any voter to vote for policies that result in harm to themselves or their family *unless* that harm is 1. shared fairly and / or 2. there is an overriding benefit to those being harmed and / or the community at large.

Harm can be defined as physical harm, financial harm, or a reduction in the overall quality of life, e.g. reduced air quality, transportation bottlenecks, noise, etc.

So the first rational characteristic of County policies for the majority would be that they do no harm. Conversely, the other side of the coin would indicate that the second rational characteristic of County policy for the majority would be that it enhances their physical, financial, and over-all quality of life.

So, rationally, what are the issues the majority of voters in Calaveras County might reasonably agree upon?

Physically, being older and perhaps more vulnerable, the majority is quite rationally keenly interested in public safety, and evidence shows it favors making it a top County budget priority.

There is evidence for this in the 2014 election for Sheriff. In that race, the incumbent Sheriff, rather than apologizing for, instead emphasized his celebrated confrontations with County Supervisors and staff over the Sheriff's Department budget. Helpfully, his opponent appeared to support the County Administration's attempts to cut the law enforcement budget, and this allows us to gain insight into public opinion on this issue. When the votes were counted, the incumbent, who was trailing early in the race after his opponent was endorsed by the Deputy Sheriff's Association, used the budget issue to dramatically turn the race around and win decisively with 56% of the vote.

As we saw in Part 1, some 75% of Primary Election voters are 65 or over, and live in their own single-family home.

Although we don't have a breakdown of Calaveras income by age, Money Magazine (June 10, 2013) reported that nationwide seniors have a median income of around \$35,000.

By definition, unlike younger citizens, most of this "Senior majority" is on a fixed or semi-fixed income, that is, it cannot look forward to meaningful increases in income through future employment gains.

As they are likely retired or semi-retired, they are likely not looking for a job.

To be sure, however, unfortunately, a minority of this senior majority finds it necessary to continue to work well past reasonable retirement age. For us, however, our age limits the types of jobs and the hours we can put in, limiting employment opportunities significantly. Someone 65 or over cannot rationally expect to be able to old down a daily job requiring eight hours of physical labor, like construction or forest restoration.

With incomes for the senior majority constrained, any increase in household expenses means, other things being equal, reducing savings, if any, or, more likely reducing consumption of something else. For those seniors on the lower end of the income curve, *any* increase in costs could mean less food or medical care.

Seen in this light, Calaveras' extreme resistance to higher taxes and fees is thoroughly rational. Even taxes intended to promote public safety like the State's new fire tax meet with fierce resistance (although the Butte fire may have altered public opinion on this issue somewhat) because for many it means a reduction in consumption.

With two notable exceptions (a school bond and a jail bond), Calaveras citizens have routinely voted down any proposed increase in County taxes or fees for the last 20 years.

Indeed, skepticism on increased taxes even extends to taxes the majority won't pay, as the County's voters consistently vote down increases in the Transient Occupancy Tax which, theoretically, could help support public services including law enforcement.

A corollary of resistance to increases in taxes and fees is the majority's deep skepticism of County government's commitment to fiscal discipline, efficiency, and transparency. With constrained incomes comes the desire of the majority to see a dollar's worth of government services delivered for every dollar of taxes collected, with only grudging allowance for salaries and overhead.

In summary, in Calaveras County, the senior majority is liable to reject any and all calls for increases in County revenues through taxes and/or fees *at least* until they have more confidence in the County's fiscal judgement, operations, and transparency.

Realistically, perhaps a County Supervisor's biggest influence on the wealth & well-being of his or her constituents is through land use policy, over which cities and counties exert enormous influence.

We've seen the data strongly suggest that most of the household wealth of the senior majority is in the value of their homes and it is likely that this majority is counting on that store of wealth to see them through their retirement. So if the market value of a senior household's house goes down, their future is even more perilous and uncertain than it already is. Conversely, if the price of houses goes up, relative to the rest of the economy, the more secure and better off the senior majority is.

The Supervisors' land use policies affect the market value of all existing real estate – both directly and indirectly – by controlling the location, quality, quantity, and circumstances surrounding new development.

Should, as some advocate, most or all restrictions on land use and development be removed, no existing residential property would be safe from a precipitous loss of value due to adverse nearby development and an overall decline in standards. A senior household's \$350,000 home would suffer a loss in market value if the house next door became a 24-hour massage and tattoo parlor. That sparkling 20-acre ranchette would be un-sellable if a big stockyard went in next door, upwind.

Land use restrictions are a rational policy approach that regulates development and provide at least potential safeguards on one's investment in a home.

Besides location and quality of new development, the Supervisors impact the value of senior's homes by regulating the pace at which the housing stock grows. If supply and demand play a role in determining the price of houses in any given geographic area, it seems rational that the greater the supply of houses, the lower the price of houses. County government policies stimulating the housing market through lax regulation and reduced impact mitigation fees, if successful, deliberately over-supply the market and should, logically, depress prices of existing homes.

Even for those fortunate seniors, whose financial condition does not require them to rely as much on the value of their house to survive financially, the quality of the infrastructure – roads, water, waste-water, and air quality, noise, -- all affect their physical well-being and are within the power of the Supervisors to influence.

With each land use decision they make, either in the new General Plan, or through their specific decisions on each new development, the Supervisors are either improving or harming the wealth and quality of life of existing residents.

So to summarize, rationally speaking, the majority senior agenda might look like this:

1. Public Safety – adequately fund the Sheriff’s office
2. No new taxes, no new fees, no new costs of any kind unless ...
3. ... and until fiscal confidence in County can be re-built
4. Protect the value of existing homes and quality of life for existing residents through sound and logical land use planning

So, we can begin to examine these issue in more detail by looking at some statistics....

Lee Atwater: Okay, seriously, I’m bored to complete torpor. Are you bored? Because I am. I’m really, really bored.

Edwin R. Murray Creek: I must admit I’m inclined to agree with him, Louis. Might it be possible to move along a little more quickly?

Louis Howe (shuffling through dozens of pages): Well, I can try but I really wanted ... hey, wait, why is Lee all of a sudden so bored? He didn’t get bored during Part 1...

Lee Atwater: Oh, there was a Part 1? Goodness me, I must have missed it. I hope it was as riveting, as utterly transfixing as this has been (rolls eyes).

End of Part Two

Stay tuned for Part Three, in which we *were* to examine how recent County policy decisions measure up to our newly defined rational majority senior policy agenda with our usual recondite ...

Lee Atwater: Folks, that’s just a fancy word for dumb and boring...

... style, but now seems destined for another edition of a rock ‘em, sock ‘em, Trump-esque **Skull Session**, Free Tri-Tip Dinner’s spontaneous and unrehearsed round table discussion featuring Lee Atwater and Louis Howe, (in spirit) David Gergen (in fun), and all moderated by our own Edwin R. Murray-Creek! See you then!