



California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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In case you missed it...

San Francisco Chronicle

Wield the power of the supermajority

By Joshua Pechthalt

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A slightly shorter version of this opinion editorial appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Progressive activists joined Gov. Jerry Brown, Democrats and state legislative leaders to pass Proposition 30, the ballot measure to raise taxes to protect public schools and social services. We would have preferred not to do so.

We wanted the Legislature to pass this modest tax but that wasn't an option. Democrats lacked the two-thirds majority needed to pass any tax bill, and no Republican legislator would break his or her rigid "no tax" pledge to join the ranks of the Democrats.

So, teachers in our federation and our labor/community partners in the Reclaiming California's Future coalition spent countless hours knocking on doors, working phone banks, holding rallies and educating family, friends, neighbors and strangers about why it was important to pass Prop. 30. We especially reached out to young people, immigrants and lower-income communities of color to persuade them to vote for a better future. These are valuable activities in a democracy.

If our Legislature functioned properly however, this tax would have passed long ago. California would not have gone through school-employee layoffs, soaring class sizes, skyrocketing college and university tuition, and damaged prospects for Californians' futures on the way to a successful tax initiative.

Democrats now hold a legislative supermajority. They should use it to repair the damage done by the two-thirds rule over the past few decades. After years of reducing public services, especially education, we have large holes to fill in programs needed by millions of Californians.

During the campaign, Brown repeatedly cautioned that Prop. 30 would not solve all of California's problems; it's merely a first step. He was right. But since the election, some Democrats, unexpectedly finding their party with a supermajority in the Legislature, have been singing a cautious tune: *We are not going to overreach. Prop. 30 is it for now.*

Understandably, these elected officials worry about a backlash from voters as we saw across the country following the 2010 elections. But there's a difference: In Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere, the Republicans implemented the program of the 1 percent - tax cuts for the wealthy and union-busting for public employees. In California, we have an opportunity to help the 99 percent.

A supermajority allows our Legislature to hold a rational conversation about what services Californians need, how much they would cost and how we pay for them—the conversation we should have been able to have all along. This is the primary job of elected officials, but the two-thirds rule prevented it. Here are a couple of conversation starters for a discussion long-deferred:

-- California remains the only oil-producing state without a severance tax. The Legislature should vote to implement one immediately. Oil corporations will not leave California for Texas or Alaska if an oil-severance tax is imposed because they already pay such a tax in those states. Oil-tax revenues, estimated at \$1 billion a year, could, for instance, roll back tuition at our public colleges and universities, increasing access to the best guarantee of a successful economic future for students - and for California.

-- It is time to replace the two-thirds vote required to pass local tax measures with a simple majority vote. On election day, 66 percent of Alameda County voters wanted to support public transportation improvements but lost. The Legislature should place a measure on the state ballot to allow local governments to do this with a majority vote. We should be able to raise funds for local public needs like transportation or libraries this way.

A window of opportunity, by definition, doesn't last. The Democrats, acting in the interest of the majority of Californians, should use theirs now.

Joshua Pechthalt is the president of the California Federation of Teachers.
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