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E.J. DIONNE: Anti-government crusaders need to be challenged head on **(<http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/opinion/22848722-47/story.csp>)**

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Here's a story you may have missed because it flies in the face of the dreary conventional wisdom: When advocates of public programs take on the right-wing anti-government crowd directly, the government-haters lose.

This is what happened in two statewide referendums last week that got buried under all of the attention paid to the governors' races in Virginia and New Jersey. In Maine, voters rejected a tax-limitation measure by a walloping 60 percent to 40 percent. In Washington state, a similar measure went down, 57-43.

They lost in part because opponents of the so-called Taxpayer Bill of Rights measures (known as TABOR) did something that happens too rarely in the national debate: They made a case for what government does, why it's important, and why cutbacks in public services can be harmful to both individual citizens and the common good.

The idea that most voters hate government has an outsized influence on the thinking of both parties. Republicans try to exploit this feeling; Democrats try to get around it.

Only rarely do those who believe in active government take the argument head-on and insist that many of the things government does are necessary and, yes, good. The media almost never discuss what the sweeping dismantling of public services inherent in the rhetoric of the anti-government movement would mean in practice. It's far easier to replay footage from a few tea party rallies over and over, and discuss some vague "mood" in the electorate.

But in Maine and Washington, the voters knew they didn't have the luxury of expressing a mood. They faced up to how limiting future tax revenues would affect the things they expect government to do. And opponents of the TABOR measures brought that idea home in straightforward terms.

In Maine, one ad featured several taxpayers warning about what less government would mean in practice: "Our school budgets have already been cut. This would mean even less money for our classrooms. ... Community health centers could be cut. People rely on them, especially now." A sympathetic-looking man then appeared on the screen to add: "My wife relies on our home nurse visits. What will we do?"

Nor was the anti-TABOR campaign confined to what individuals get out of government. Another ad highlighted the larger social and economic impact of public education. "Without strong public schools, our kids won't be prepared for good jobs," the announcer said. "Maine's future could be in doubt."

In Washington state — where tax limitation was opposed by leading moderate Republicans, including former Gov. Dan Evans and former Sen. Slade Gorton — the No campaign offered a cross-generational message, focusing on cuts in both school budgets and home care for seniors.

Opposition to these measures went well beyond the ranks of ideological liberals. Recall that on the same day that Maine rejected TABOR, it also rejected gay marriage.

It's true that Washington and Maine have been reliably Democratic in recent presidential elections. But this is precisely why the defeat of these anti-tax measures was so important. Anti-government crusaders were getting ready to argue that if TABOR measures could pass in blue states, theirs was the wave of the future.

"I think the Maine TABOR will sort of be a spark to other states," Grover Norquist, the country's premier anti-tax agitator, told voters during a visit to South Portland in October. "If Maine, a moderate Northeastern state says, 'Yes, let's take a look at this,' it then becomes a stronger sell in Arizona and Washington and Oregon and Florida."

By that logic, it's now a weaker sell. That's why conservatives hope no one pays attention.

But will President Obama and his party take the lesson and go on offense against simple-minded anti-government screeds now getting so much play?

Obama took a brief whack at doing so in his September health care speech. He noted that his predecessors “understood that the danger of too much government is matched by the perils of too little; that without the leavening hand of wise policy, markets can crash, monopolies can stifle competition, the vulnerable can be exploited.” Why aren’t we hearing more of this?

E.J. Dionne (postchat@aol.com) is a columnist for The Washington Post.

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