

The Almanac of American Politics 2002

Profile of Rep. Henry Waxman and the 29th District

The Westside: The term was not much used 20 years ago, but is now shorthand for what might be the biggest and flashiest concentration of affluence in the world. It is the heartland of one of America's most productive and creative industries and one of the nation's major exports, show business. The first moviemakers came here earlier in the century, looking for a place to shoot silent films where the sunlight was more dependable than in Astoria, Queens, or Englewood, New Jersey. They found it in Hollywood, a suburb just annexed by burgeoning Los Angeles when the first movie studio was built in 1911. In 1923 came the Hollywood sign, overlooking the soon-famous intersection of Hollywood and Vine. By the 1930s, big studio lots were scattered around town, over the mountains in Burbank or out toward the ocean in Westwood and Culver City. Miraculously, the studio bosses of that era -- most of them Jewish immigrants with little ancestral experience of America -- created a popular culture that was universally accessible and embodied the American spirit in a way that still captures the imagination. This was the universal American culture of the 1940s movies that Ronald Reagan understood and transferred into politics. Today's showbiz moguls, by contrast, sometimes seem absorbed in the solipsistic enterprise of putting their own personal idiosyncrasies on the screen or the tube or tapes or CDs.

Showbiz still sets the tone for the Westside. It remains tremendously profitable, in large part because it's not run by big business units but by thousands of craftsmen and entrepreneurs who keep it anchored in Los Angeles because so many of them remain here. People on the Westside like to portray themselves as artists in a garret, willing to risk starving to make art and speak truth to bourgeois society. But their yen for fashionable new moral standards make them disdainful of the ordinary people who are the market of any mass entertainment. The Westside loves to congratulate itself on its moral daring when it makes a movie or TV show revealing businessmen or priests as criminals. And yet the marketplace may be teaching showbiz some lessons. As Michael Medved, movie critic and author of has pointed out, Hollywood's most obscene, anti-business and anti-religious products don't sell nearly as well as its family fare; and television shows and movies started reflecting a wider range of subjects and values. Showbiz rejoiced in the election of Bill Clinton and in his frequent forays into California and obvious fascination with entertainers, and it rejected with fury the notion that there was something wrong about his affair with a White House intern from the Westside or with lying under oath in a sexual harassment case in a United States District Court.

Not everyone on the Westside is in show business, of course. This is also the home of thousands of small entrepreneurs, manufacturers, and inventors and marketers of everything imaginable, who sparked the huge growth of the Los Angeles Basin, and there are even traces of pre-show business Los Angeles money, which is also plentiful. There are large numbers of singles and gays here: apartment-renters provided majorities for Santa Monica's city government, which thrived when it imposed rent control but foundered when it invited in more homeless. The core of Hollywood itself has gone seedy and is the home now of many Central American immigrants, a high-crime and riot zone, but the Fairfax neighborhood remains solidly middle-class Jewish -- though many of its Jews today are recent Russian immigrants. Hancock Park looks as aristocratic as it did when it was built, when Beverly Hills was vacant land. The Westside has been the home of a former president who does not at all exemplify its politics, Ronald Reagan; before his Alzheimer's Disease worsened, he kept his office on the former Fox lot that is now Century City. It is the center of the second largest Jewish community in the United States, as well as the focus of the 1980s immigration of Iranians to the United States. It is also the locus of some of America's most expensive residential real estate, where people buy houses for multiples of \$ 1 million, knock down the structure and build something new for a few more millions, and of one of the world's premier high-priced shopping areas -- Rodeo Drive, once a quite ordinary shopping street.

The 29th Congressional District of California contains almost all the major elements of Westside Los Angeles, from old, high-income Los Feliz and the gay neighborhood around Silver Lake through Hollywood and Hancock Park, west through Beverly Hills and Westwood, Bel Air and Brentwood, Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades. It is solidly Democratic and not just in votes: It probably contributes more

money to Democratic candidates and liberal causes than any other district with the exception of Manhattan's New York 14th. Its boundaries are carefully sculpted to put blacks in the 32nd District to the south and Hispanics and Asians in the 30th to the east; far from being racially diverse, it has the highest percentage of non-Hispanic whites of any Los Angeles Basin district.

The congressman from the 29th is Henry Waxman, a Democrat elected in 1974, one of the ablest members of the House, a shrewd political operator who is a skilled and idealistic policy entrepreneur. There is no Westside glitz about him: He grew up over his family's store in Watts, his personal demeanor is quiet, he has never attended the Oscars ceremony. He moved up rapidly in politics by spying openings before others did and taking advantage of them. He ran against Assemblyman Lester McMillan in the mostly Jewish Fairfax area in 1968, at 28, and won 64% in the primary. From 1971 -- 72 he chaired the redistricting committee, a good place to make friends, but he went to Congress in 1974 in a district designed, he points out, not by his committee but by a court. Waxman's biggest break came after the 1978 election, when he was elected chairman of the Commerce Committee's Health and Environment Subcommittee. This was one of the first times House Democrats decided to ignore seniority in handing out subcommittee chairs. Nevertheless, Waxman argued his case on the issues and -- in a move quite unprecedented at the time, though common in Sacramento and now also in Washington -- made campaign contributions to other Democrats on the full committee, and won the post, 15 -- 12, over the widely respected Richardson Preyer of North Carolina.

The campaign contributions were no accident. Waxman and his friend Howard Berman built their own political machine in Los Angeles. Its power came not from patronage but from fund-raising and savvy. Their specialty was targeted direct mail, with hundreds of customized letters and endorsement slates sent out to different lists of people. In the apolitical commonwealth of California, where television advertising is exceedingly expensive and people seem to avoid politics, this made them critical though not always successful players. But in 1992 their machine foundered: Westsider Mel Levine lost the Senate nomination to Barbara Boxer in "the year of the woman," and Tom Hayden beat a Waxman-Berman ally for state senator. Since then, Waxman has rarely taken an active role in Los Angeles area politics; an exception came in the April 2001 primary for the vacant 32nd District, when he backed the unsuccessful Kevin Murray.

Waxman has been a major national policymaker for two decades -- arguably, the most important lawmaker on environmental issues. In 1981 and 1982 he prevented the Reagan Administration and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell from revising the Clean Air Act; biding his time, he worked to strengthen the law in its 1990 revision. He and Dingell -- frequent shouting-match partners who nevertheless maintained a working relationship -- hammered out a compromise, delaying stricter California-type auto standards until 1994 and moving more aggressively on non-auto issues. Another great Waxman project has been expanding Medicaid for the poor. His strategy was to threaten to hold up budget reconciliation bills unless they required states to expand Medicaid eligibility. Between 1984 and 1990, he got coverage for all poor children up to 18, all children under seven and pregnant women in families under 133% of poverty income. This helped raise Medicaid from 9% to 14% of state spending in the 1980s, and helps to explain why Waxman was so disliked by many governors.

Waxman had less success on reforming national health care. He wanted to move to something like a single-payer program and supported the Clinton plan but to no avail. He has secured more funding for AIDS research, important in the 29th District with its large gay population. He passed a law providing damages to children injured by required immunizations, sponsored measures to require testing of mammography devices, expanded the availability of generic drugs, extended patent protection for drugs for time spent during the approval process, and tried unsuccessfully to legalize the use of heroin to reduce the pain of terminal cancer patients. In early 1994, in widely publicized hearings, he lined up the chief executive officers of leading tobacco companies and accused them of adding nicotine and other substances to cigarettes and of lying in their testimony. All this had no immediate legislative result, and when Thomas Bliley of Virginia, became Commerce Committee chair, the hearings stopped. But Waxman brought the tobacco issue into public view, and he helped to inspire the lawsuits against tobacco

companies which have resulted in the biggest redistribution of corporate assets -- from the tobacco companies to state governments and trial lawyers -- in history.

Waxman reacted with dismay to the Republican takeover of Congress, but with no slackening of effort. On some issues, he worked to negotiate compromises with Republicans, notably the Safe Drinking Water Act and the pesticide standards in the Food Quality Provision Act of 1996; part of his strategy was "right-to-know" amendments listing contaminants. He led the fight against Republicans' regulatory reform and Medicare and Medicaid changes. He had staff investigate nursing homes in Los Angeles in 1999 and found "appalling" conditions and sought to impose sanctions for nursing homes that violate federal health standards. He and Lincoln Diaz-Balart sought to establish nationally the California practice of not barring immigrants from Medicaid. In 2000 he co-sponsored the bill to let families with disabled children receive Medicaid even if family income rises above the limit; after opposition from the Senate leadership, he reintroduced it with a lower limit in 2001 with Republican Pete Sessions and Senators Charles Grassley and Edward Kennedy.

In 1997 Waxman gave up the ranking position on Health to be ranking Democrat on the Government Reform Committee. There he sharply attacked Chairman Dan Burton's investigation of Clinton campaign misdeeds, arguing that Burton had given himself unprecedented subpoena power and was misusing it, and he emerged as perhaps the House's most articulate defender of Clinton against scandal charges. Waxman did stop short of defending Clinton in some cases. In September 1999 he said he "probably" wouldn't have granted clemency to Puerto Rican FALN terrorists as Clinton had in August, evidently to help his wife's Senate campaign in New York. And in February 2001 he said that Clinton showed "incredibly poor judgment" in pardoning Marc Rich. But overall he has peppered Burton with criticism and, in the opinion of some observers, run circles around him. In 1999 he ridiculed Burton for not noticing that evidence of the use of tear gas cannisters at Waco had been provided to the committee back in 1995; Burton said that the committee had been buried by an avalanche of 100,000 documents. Waxman has criticized Burton for offenses that are not strictly political. In January 2000 he questioned the scheduling of a closed-session hearing on Russian threats to the United States in Los Angeles; Burton was attending a golf tournament in Palm Springs. In April 2000 he said that a Burton hearing was stacked to show a connection between autism and vaccination; Burton has an autistic granddaughter. And he goes after other Republicans: he served on the 1999 committee to choose a new House chaplain, and charged that anti-Catholic bias prevented the selection of the priest who was the informal choice of the committee.

Waxman has always won re-election easily, and has contributed generously to other Democrats' campaigns. The 29th district had little population growth in the 1990s, and must be expanded by nearly 60,000 people, but Democrats close to Waxman control the redistricting process and there is likely to be another Westside district that will be happy to reelect him.

Cook's Call Another incumbent with no re-election concerns is Henry Waxman. Since winning the seat in 1974 his closest electoral call was a 61% win in 1992. This seat will stay firmly planted in the Democratic column.

THE PEOPLE: Pop. 2000: 584,823; Pop. 1990: 571,386, up 2.4% 1990 -- 2000. 76.5% White, 3.3% Black, 9.8% Asian, 0.3% Amer. Indian, 0.1% Hawaiian, 4.6% Two + races, 5.4% Other; 12.1% Hispanic Origin.
