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Line-Item Veto Power

New Study by IWU Political Scientist Casts Doubt on Legislative Device as Government Spending Remedy

(Bucks, Cal. H., Chicago)

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Ronald Reagan wanted it. Bill Clinton wants it. And, it is a centerpiece of U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich's (R-Ga.) Contract with America.

What these Republicans and Democrats want is the line-item veto, legislation giving the president authority to scratch individual items from legislation. Currently, U.S. presidents must scuttle an entire piece of legislation, if they find a single section offensive.

Reformers view the line-item veto, a tool already in the hands of 43 governors and many mayors, as a powerful device to throttle federal spending--especially for "pork barrel" projects--and control deficits.

However, a new study co-authored by an Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist casts doubt on the effectiveness of the line-item veto.

"There is no evidence in this research," the study concludes, "that the line-item veto leads to greater fiscal thriftiness in American cities."

The new study, aimed at gauging the fiscal impact of granting line-item veto power to elected city government officials, is based on an examination of 81 cities with populations greater than 75,000. Among this group, about one-third of mayors have line-item veto powers.

The study was conducted by Tari Renner, associate professor and chair of the political science department at Illinois Wesleyan University, and Victor DeSantis, a member of the political science department at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts and a former student of Renner's when he was a faculty member at Washington College in Chestertown, Md.

Results of their study were presented last month at the 1996 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago.

The study concludes that "... elected executives may not use the line-item veto to promote fiscal restraint because they are subject to the same political pressures as legislators representing specific districts."

Renner and DeSantis' conclusions generally agree with previous research focusing on line-item veto powers wielded by governors. For example, former Congressional Budget Office Director Robert D. Reischauer has testified before Congress that evidence indicates that the line-item veto has not been used to control spending or deficits, but has helped governors to pursue their own priorities.

Line-item veto advocates continue to see it as a magic wand to restrain government spending, despite research to the contrary. For example, the Renner-DeSantis study cites other research on the line-item veto at

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IWU Prof's Line-Item Veto Research/2

the state level--where reformers frequently tout the device's effectiveness, observing: "The empirical studies on the fiscal consequences of the line-item have exclusively focused on the American states. They do not generally confirm the expectations of the reform advocates who presume it will promote fiscal policy restraint."

The theory explored in the Renner-DeSantis study is the notion that the executive line-item veto promotes fiscal responsibility by empowering elected executives--like mayors, representing at-large constituencies--to control spending behavior of lawmakers representing narrower constituencies, such as wards.

"It is assumed," the researchers wrote, "that narrow parochial legislators elected from districts attempt to inflate spending that executives elected at-large must trim."

The researchers tested this hypothesis by using mathematical models that examined per capita general revenues and indebtedness relative to expenditures, as well as other factors.

Renner and DeSantis conclude that line-item veto advocates are correct in their expectation that "officials elected from narrow constituencies are less fiscally responsible than those elected at-large. The line-item veto, however, apparently does nothing to reduce this tendency."

The U.S. House and Senate passed the line-item veto legislation in March. The Senate acted on a 69-31 vote, while the U.S. House endorsed the measure in a 232-177 vote, which was attached to legislation upping the debt limit. President Clinton has signed the legislation.

President Ronald Reagan first called for a federal line-item veto--a power similar to what he wielded as California governor--in his 1984 State-of-the-Union message.

The new line-item veto legislation, which shifts tremendous power from Capitol Hill to the White House, is effective with the next U.S. president.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,850 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.

Editor's Note: Tari Renner, IWU associate professor and chair of political science, can be reached for interviews at 309/556-3039.