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Is ignoring tax increases unfair to millionaires?

by Joe Ferullo

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The theory goes like this: Craven and base politicians, focused only on the next election, will give the people whatever they want. This is mainstay of modern thought, the supposed dark side of democracy -- the point when pandering meets public opinion polls. And yet, on one topic this bedrock notion crumbles.

Taxes.

These days, it seems, everyone thinks more is actually better, but a deadlocked Congress -- trapped by a GOP no-tax pledge -- is not about to give the people what they want on this one.

Lawmakers appearing on various Sunday talk shows made it clear: A real budget deal based on a balance of cuts and tax hikes now looks impossible. But that is not what is being heard from the streets.

A new poll by USC and the Los Angeles Times shows that 64 percent of those surveyed would shell out more in taxes to improve education -- and that includes 60 percent of self-described moderate-to-liberal Republicans. The poll comes as state university students protest yet another tuition hike systemwide, and California officials predict they may need to cut another \$1 billion from education to help close a projected budget gap by the end of the fiscal year.

According to the poll, this willingness to chip in and help out carries across most groups, younger and older, richer and poorer. Only self-described conservative Republicans were against it: just 34 percent of them supported new taxes to fund education.

But, wait, there's more: Another newspaper report detailed a new effort by one segment of American society to push hard for tax increases on itself: billionaires.

The Los Angeles Times also revealed the formation of "The Think Long Committee," a group of very, very rich Californians headed by Google chairman Eric Schmidt and real estate developer Eli Broad. Their main objective has nothing to do with protecting their tax shelters, pushing for further drops in capital gains taxes or eliminating all inheritance taxes. Instead, this band of billionaires hopes to place a special initiative on the state ballot to raise California taxes by \$10 billion through "maintaining the progressive tax system," according to a Think Long spokesman.

This comes on the heels of a new national group, called Patriotic Millionaires for Fiscal Restraint. They were in Capitol Hill a few days ago, asking members of the budget super-committee to please -- pretty please -- OK hiking taxes on, yes, millionaires, as one way to trim the deficit.

All this has had no effect in Congress, which is fairly astounding. One reason for this can be found in the California poll. Again, the only major group against a state tax increase to help improve education was conservative Republicans. This group also dominates voting in GOP primaries and back many Tea Party efforts. They speak loudly and carry a couple of big sticks: They vote and they fund campaigns.

This year, the people may not get what they want. Even the millionaires. That tapping sound you hear comes from every political scientist in the country rewriting their lesson plans.

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