

Lower taxes cut states' revenues

United Press International
 If Americans no longer climb aboard British ships to throw tea into Boston Harbor, they are once again highly disgruntled with the tax burden they bear.

They vent their anger more and more toward vulnerable targets — taxes and spending. They demand relief.

The current tax situation prompted one South Dakota legislator, A. J. Barondeau, to remark: "Why don't we just pass a law where every week we grab everybody, hold 'em upside down and shake 'em to see if they've got any loose change."

The most conspicuous form of relief is on the property tax though some states also have reduced income taxes, eliminated items from the sales tax, given energy breaks and other tax reductions.

From the opposite end, caps have been placed on state and local budgets, indirectly holding down taxes since they limit the amount of money a municipality or a state can spend.

In the last two years, the most frequently targeted levy is the property

tax, a considerably large amount of taxes a person pays out each year.

"There's generally a push to reduce property taxes," said a spokeswoman for the Commerce Clearing House in Chicago. "The popular thing is to reduce it because it's an unpopular thing with most people."

Property taxes are easily attacked because they are very visible and usually administered on the local level where officials are accessible.

Two years ago, a man unheard of outside of California, Howard Jarvis, started a movement to slash property taxes in his state.

Proposition 13, as his referendum was called, was contagious at first as movements sprung up in the cities and suburbs across the nation to combat a general discontent; growth rates of real income had been declining while the tax burden had been increasing.

In most cases, the movements died. Not every state had a system of initiative and referendum as did California which enabled its voters to put Proposition 13 on the ballot.

Nervous legislators also quickly tried to develop other methods for

cutting taxes to appease their citizens and turn their efforts away from Proposition 13.

"In my view, the notion of putting it on one tax is absurd. It's distorting. It's mixing the issues of not liking property tax with an independent

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— Mel Wax, press secretary for San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein.

issue," said Anita Summers, an economist at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "In California they converged all of their dislikes on one issue."

"The real impact is about to hit," she added, noting that California re-

sidents have been living off a depleting surplus the last two years.

Mel Wax, press secretary for San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein, said the surplus would not last much longer.

"What has happened in the last two years is we have used up our reserve," he said. "We had money set aside for a rainy day and it's been raining for two years. The state of California used its surplus to bail us out but that's going to disappear very soon."

The problems stemming from direct property tax slashes are numerous, as evidenced by San Francisco's closing of schools and furloughing thousands of city workers.

"Another serious effect is that people come to realize you can only fully recess that property once it is sold," Summers said. "That is a very strong incentive to stay put. That could have an effect on industry."

She also pointed out that renters in California who did not benefit from the property tax slashing are now voting in rent control, "which is one of the biggest forms of 'big government' around."

Despite its failure to spread in full force throughout the country, Proposition 13 has had a significant effect on other states. Today more than half of the states have some form of property tax relief though none as drastic.

Nevada has come the closest with its 1978 approval of a constitutional amendment, called Question Six. The amendment, which would cut property taxes by at least 50 percent, must be approved a second time in November. Idaho adopted a similar taxslashing plan.

In Louisiana, where officials call their residents the lowest taxed people in the nation, all homes valued at \$50,000 or less are exempt from property taxes. A proposal to extend the exemption to all homes is expected to be considered in the Legislature this year.

But in most states, one doesn't always get something for nothing. Taxes dropping in one category may simply mean they go up in another.

Such a "tax shift" measure is being considered in Michigan to combat the feared Proposition 13. The shift would reduce the unpopular taxes and replace lost revenue by hiking

some presumably more palatable state tax, such as income or sales.

A seemingly less enticing but more effective way of keeping down costs is to put a cap on budgets, which indirectly saves people money because it keeps down revenues and spending.

Actually, Proposition 13 is a tax-capping amendment to the California constitution. In addition to that, a referendum was passed by California voters last November placing spending limits, based on population increases, on city budgets.

"It's disaster," Wax said. "We're at

the moment of truth. We have bled our municipal railway but increased fees for services, cut the per we can and the city pays down 11 percent."

There are measures on the ballot in California to raise taxes under state law a two-thirds vote needed to pass it.

"We anticipate that if we have the money we'll just start the people," Wax said. "It will mean closing libraries, eliminating health services, drastically cutting payroll. What it means is services people need and expect to be delivered because we can't pay them. Our situation is going to get bad to worse."

While most state governments are looking for new sources of revenue, not all of them are.

Oklahoma reduced its income tax by \$45 million last year and is enjoying a revenue bonanza because of increases in oil and gas prices and a profitable year for cattle and wheat.

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