

Opinion

California's GOP had better stop feuding

Shawn Steel

Willie Brown, immediately after the election, declared that the Democrats are going after Gov. Wilson. Speaker Brown's announcement promises that the Republican Party woes did not end with the election of Bill Clinton. Republicans lost seats everywhere, even in districts with Republican majorities. What happened to the Republicans?

Republicans squandered their opportunity for success by engaging in a vicious and expensive family feud. At odds are competing groups of conservatives against moderates led by Gov. Wilson. With a united party Pete Wilson was able to forge a narrow victory over Dianne Feinstein in 1990. Immediately after his election, however, conservatives complained that he appointed a number of moderates and Democrats to his administration, including the appointment of John Seymour, his US Senate replacement. Many conservatives viewed the appointments with alarm and suspicion.

In the Spring of 1991, the division that had mushroomed between the conservatives and the moderates reached an intense fever with Republican Assembly members. Conservative Republicans openly denounced Gov. Wilson over his breathtaking, record-breaking tax increases. Conservatives felt ambushed and betrayed by a Republican governor. The battle lines hardened in the spring primaries this year.

It was thought 1992 was to be the long-awaited year for Republicans with "fair" reapportionment. Pete Wilson delivered on his promise for fair reapportionment, and Republicans had an unparalleled opportunity for the first time in 20 years to get more Republicans elected to Congress and the Legislature. Instead, Republicans actually lost two Assembly seats, from 33 to 31, out of 80 and only gained two of the seven new congressional seats.

Republicans, whether moderate or conservative, lost all over the state. This is particularly true when you look at the unsuccessful races by incumbent Sen. John Seymour, the moderate, and by Bruce Herschensohn, the conservative, who narrowly lost in a bitterly contested race against Barbara Boxer.

Republicans all over the state were shocked by the tidal wave of losses. Gov. Wilson's welfare reform initiative failed; his Senate appointee was defeated; he led the Bush/Quayle re-election effort and all candidates he financed and supported in the Republican primaries were rejected. A consensus is emerging that Wilson's re-election chances are in great jeopardy. There may be conservative opposition in his own primary, thereby guaranteeing the election of a Democrat. With feeble

Republican opposition, the Democrats will be in a position to dominate California for at least a decade, and some economists and business people believe this will render California into a second-class economic entity.

There may be a window of opportunity. Mainstream Republican leaders are attempting to develop a rapprochement among the warring factions and bring about genuine reconciliation.

Republicans may be shocked into adopting a new attitude. Gov. Wilson announced a day after the election that the fighting must end. Humbled conservatives also realized that continued fighting can only continue to hurt Republican candidates. Putting aside personality disputes and esoteric debates as Ronald Reagan knew when creating the "11th Commandment" are critical for the Republicans.

All factions can agree on the Reagan Coalition principles of economic growth, opportunity, and personal responsibility. If the rift continues to widen, not only will Pete Wilson lose, but other Republican office holders in traditional strongholds will be threatened with the new vigor and power of the Democrat Party.

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