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California GOP should join the 21st century

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Professionalize, develop bench strength, expand membership

BY: Shawn Steel, Vice Chairman, California Republican Party

Democrats didn't steal the election. They got their people to the polls and we didn't. In California, using a combination of a street army of union members, mountains of money and the wholesale use of a new political animal - the "late" absentee ballot, they won several tight elections. Here and in other parts of the country, the Democrats have leapfrogged past Republicans in organizational skills that used to be Republican strengths.

Jane Harman virtually invented the late absentee ballot in her first race for Congress in 1994. She lost the effort on Election Day. But with thousands of late absentee ballots arriving on Election Day and counted afterwards from Democrat strongholds of the district she eked out her a victory over Susan Brooks, by 812 votes out of almost 200,000 votes cast. Republicans were shocked. The absentee ballot had always favored Republicans; it elected George Deukmejian in 1982, when he actually lost on Election Day. Democrats apparently learned from that lesson, which ultimately gave Republicans the governor's chair for 16 years.

This year, nearly 1 million late absentee ballots were turned in on Election Day. Many of those ballots were driven by a powerful Democrat get-out-the-vote program weeks before the election. Democrats have learned how to "turn out" their low-propensity voters. Union reps personally visit "low-pro" Democrats and ask these voters, on the spot, to sign a request for an absentee ballot. Later, when absentee ballots are mailed to the "low pro" voters, the union reps return to the same households to inquire if the voter received his or her ballot. Once the ballot is completed, many of the reps take the ballot and "bundle" them later to turn in on Election Day. This is new, costly and time-consuming. We have never seen this level of turnout from low-propensity Democrats or this volume of late absentee ballots.

In Harman's second coming this year, no one worked harder than incumbent Steve Kuykendall. But the Republican voter turnout was unimpressive, while the Democrat sections of the district broke records. On election night, the margin was razor thin. But the late absentee ballot dashed Kuykendall's hopes, providing his margin of defeat by 3,833 votes. In Washington state, the Republican U.S. Senate incumbent also "won" on Election Day, but lost, subject to recount, due to late-arriving absentee ballots. Challenger Maria Cantwell won her election by 1,953 votes due to these votes. In California's Fifth state Senate district Republican Alan Nakanishi "won" on Election Day, then lost it due to late absentee ballots, by 543 votes.

Republicans today face a more determined, better-financed and much more powerful adversary. What can Republicans do? Is California's shifting social landscape destined to move the Golden State into one-party dominance? In the short term, Republicans have two key goals. Prepare to turn out the low-propensity Republican voter and gird for the gerrymandering onslaught.

Unless the Republican Party can turn out its own voting base, it cannot win significant victories for years to come. And, if the party takes a back seat or is preoccupied by in-fighting, the Democrats could deprive Californians of balanced elections for the rest of this decade.

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Long-term strategies to revitalize the Republican Party rest on three major objectives.

The party needs to join the 21st century by professionalizing its organization. The outdated Nixon-era structure needs reformulation, along a modern corporate dot.com premise. The party needs full-time field workers managing year-round registration campaigns. There are over 5 million registered Republicans; however, Governor Bush attracted only 4,005,623 votes, including what he received from sympathetic Democrats and independents. A special operation needs to be established to identify low-propensity voters and encourage the 1 million or so Republicans who did not vote in 1998 and this year to participate. Democrats have taught their low-pros to enter the culture of voting through the mail. Republicans must do the same.

Expanding party membership is crucial. Democrats learned long ago to regularly include in their circles each new immigrant group entering American political life. Republicans historically honor new immigrants but have been slow to incorporate the dynamic ethnic middle class communities rapidly growing in California. Dramatic measures must be taken to include emerging leaders from all ethnic communities in our newly cosmopolitan Party.

Finally, the party needs to build a bench. Democrats have concentrated on running promising candidates for local offices for years. Education unions dominate most school districts. Local elected officials who develop a following become ideal candidates for state or federal office. Some Republicans still believe there is such a thing as non-partisan elections.

It's time for Republicans to wake up. The party must train a new generation of Republicans to serve on city councils and school boards. By providing community service, Republicans will be better prepared to take on incumbent Democrat politicians even in gerrymandered legislative districts.

If Republicans will emphasize full commitment to embracing growing but conservative ethnic communities, while retaining traditional suburban families and building a Republican bench, California will be a two-party state throughout the 21st century.

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<http://www.ocregister.com/liberty/oranegrove.shtml>
http://www.egroups.com/message/Latino_Republicans/568

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