



Los Angeles Times

Friday, November 8, 2002

Commentary

State Republicans See Light in 2006

BY SHAWN STEEL

While the midterm election was a national triumph for the Republican Party, in California it played out as a tragedy. Bill Simon lost the opportunity to defeat one of the most unpopular governors in state history, and the Democrats swept all statewide offices (except in the still too-close-to-call controller's race).

It's important to put the results in perspective. The massive Democratic campaign war chests in California dwarfed those of their Republican opponents. Only the Simon campaign amassed a significant treasury to sustain an effective TV campaign in the final weeks. Consequently, voters were drenched with Democrat ads but just lightly spritzed with Republican spots.

Given that disparity, the narrowness of the Democrat margin in most of the statewide partisan races is astonishing. Only Atty. Gen. Bill Lockyer broke 50%.

Gov. Gray Davis himself can take cold comfort from his win. His \$70-million campaign netted him just 47% of the vote — less than he received in 1998 and only five points ahead of Simon. Further, he remains deeply unpopular, a termed-out lame duck who faces a hostile Democratic Legislature and statewide officials with no loyalty to him.

Clearly, the Democratic sweep occurred primarily because of the fund-raising advantage, not the fantasy advanced

Despite losses, slim margins bolster hopes of California GOP.

by liberal pundits that California has morphed into a Democratic bastion. It's also worth noting that, despite being massively outspent, Republicans gained a state Senate seat and two Assembly seats, and they may yet pick up a third.

The usual suspects in the media and the Republican Party are resuscitating an equally false notion that Simon lost because he was "too conservative" for California. It's a variation on the canard that the Republican Party must move left to be viable in California — a nostrum dispelled by looking at the election results.

For example, take the fates of Bruce McPherson and Tom McClintock, the most liberal and most conservative members, respectively, of the GOP ticket. McPherson perfectly fits the theoretical profile of the ideal GOP statewide candidate: pro-choice, strong moderate credentials, fawning press coverage, a comparably well-funded campaign and a compelling personal story. Yet he lost to gaffe-prone Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante by nine points. In stark contrast, the conservative McClintock, the GOP's nominee for controller, received more votes than any other statewide Republican candidate — and may yet eke out a victory de-

spite having been vastly outspent by the multimillionaire entrepreneur Steve Westly, whose ads attacking McClintock's pro-life stance had little effect.

Republicans have reason to be hopeful. The relatively strong showing by GOP candidates will lead President Bush to vigorously contest California, and the surprising GOP gains in Congress are a testament to his campaign prowess. Several U.S. representatives who would make attractive candidates are seriously considering challenging U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer in her bid for a third term in 2004, and an active Bush campaign would be a huge boost to whoever wins the nomination. Beyond that, 2006 offers the prospect of the governorship and half the constitutional offices opening up because of term limits.

At the same time, Republicans must mount a credible ground game if they are to prevail. While the Democrats deploy an army of thousands of paid workers every election, Republicans respond with just a few platoons. Fielding a comparable force would be very expensive, but the price is well worth the extra three to five points in the polls it would produce.

Four years is a long time in politics. California Democrats were prostrate in 1994 and triumphant in 1998. The pendulum can easily swing back in the GOP's direction, especially with a popular president giving it a push.

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