

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

OPINION  
COLUMNS

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## Winners and losers

Arnold ascends, Cruz collapses and the casino tribes forfeit vast good will



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*Editor's note: Mr. Steel, co-founder of the recall campaign, was the first signature on the first recall petition.*

The historic California recall is now history. The winners and losers of this epic event will surface in the backwash of the recall during the coming weeks, but let us

take note of the more obvious winners and losers.

**Winners:** Obviously, the biggest recall winner is **Arnold Schwarzenegger**. Arnold seized a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bypass a bruising Republican primary and go directly to the voters. At least that was the theory. As it turned out, circumstances forced him to simultaneously wage a primary election (against Tom McClintock) and a general election (against Cruz Bustamante). Celebrity, a massive war chest, a populist rapport with voters and pure will enabled him to transcend media-elite scorn and last-minute dirt to grab the gubernatorial brass ring. Democratic legislators who smugly think they can tie a Gov. Schwarzenegger in knots are in for a rude awakening.

**Tom McClintock:** He wins even by losing. He avoided being the spoiler who swung the election to Bustamante while advancing his cherished conservative cause by advocating his principles in a direct and dignified manner that earned the respect of voters across the political spectrum. McClintock has consequently amassed invaluable statewide name ID and a huge database of devoted donors, and is beautifully positioned to run for state-

wide office in three years.

**California Republican Party:** What a difference a recall makes. The state GOP was prostrate following its wipeout in the November 2002 elections. Although the institutional California Republican Party was slow to back the recall – and, indeed, was initially indifferent or opposed to the recall – it acted as a tonic on the moribund CRP by energizing volunteers and activists like nothing had in years. GOP registration has picked up dramatically, and small donors are once again opening their wallets: During the 48 hours following the 9th U.S. Circuit Court panel's cancellation of the recall, the

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CRP received more than \$2 million in donations.

**California voters:** Media putdowns about the “recall circus” aside, the recall did more to focus California voters on state issues than any other event in recent history. When was the last time two-thirds of California voters watched any political event, let alone a gubernatorial debate? Everywhere, Californians were talking about the recall and issues like taxes, the budget, immigration, health care mandates and special-interest influence. This can't be anything but good for our civic culture.

**Losers:** We start with **Cruz Bustamante**. The lieutenant governor's prospects for higher office weren't stellar to begin with, but his even less stellar campaign demolished those he had. Bustamante may, in

reality, be the soul of political moderation, but the recall has indelibly branded him as the condescending, left-wing Mexican nationalist candidate in the pocket of the casino tribes. With much stronger candidates in the wings, Democrats aren't going to give him a second chance at the prize in 2006 after his dismal performance at the top of the ticket.

**Casino Indians:** It only took a few weeks for the casino tribes to shatter the sympathetic public image they'd cultivated for years. Now the public sees them as just one more powerful, politician-buying special interest throwing its weight around Sacramento – and they'll have to deal with a now-hostile Gov. Arnold.

**Puke politics:** Never have I seen a political candidate endure such an intense, protracted sliming as Arnold Schwarzenegger has these last few weeks – and still emerge the winner on Election Day. Perhaps we have witnessed the high-water mark of the “puke politics” perfected by Gray Davis, and the beginning of a less polluted political atmosphere.

**The Los Angeles Times:** The Thursday-before-the-election groping story wasn't just a stink bomb – it was a nuclear warhead. The Terminator took a direct hit and kept right on going, while it was the Times that suffered collateral damage from the blowback. More than 1,000 subscribers called to cancel, and you can be sure the Times has lost credibility with many times that number. When the L.A. Times' biased coverage becomes a national news story, you know there's something rotten at Times Mirror Square.

And where is Gray Davis on this list? For the sake of space, he's been recalled.