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Dem dominance of state is dead

Election message is clear: Don't raise our taxes and stop rewarding unions



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The March 2 primary election indicates the spirit of the Gray Davis recall is alive and well. The recall of the unpopular Democratic Davis and the combined 62 percent of the vote captured by Republicans Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom McClintock upended assumptions that Democratic dominance of California politics was part of the natural order of the universe. Last week's primary election is further evidence that the electorate is refusing to abide by its image as the "Left Coast," and contains strong messages for Republicans and Democrats alike.

Obviously, the big winner is Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in light of the overwhelming approval of his Propositions 57 and 58. I am not singing the praises of Prop. 57, which I view as a nasty but necessary detour along the way to re-establishing fiscal responsibility. But regardless of one's views of 57 and 58, their passage sharply increases Schwarzenegger's clout in the coming struggle over budget cuts with the Democratic Legislature.

There's been plenty of talk about the governor bypassing an obstructionist Legislature to enact his reforms, but it was all theory and no practice. By taking two initiatives

that started out behind in the polls - usually a sure sign of defeat - and marshaling lopsided victories through force of personality, Schwarzenegger has provided Democrats with disconcerting proof that threats to go directly to the people will very likely succeed.

Indeed, his administration is already working to qualify a workers' compensation reform initiative, since the Legislature allowed his March 1 deadline for reform legislation to pass without action. When was the last time California had a governor who could credibly make such a threat to the Legislature?

The election was also a big victory in the taxpayers' ongoing struggle with government employee unions. A resounding 66 percent of voters said no to Proposition 56, sponsored by the unions to make it easier for the Legislature to raise taxes and spend money. 76 percent of Orange County voters rejected it; Prop. 56 lost in even ultraliberal Santa Cruz County.

There can be no mistaking the message of Prop. 56's defeat: Fix the budget mess without increasing taxes. This is a warning to Democratic legislators - especially those in marginal seats whose willingness to raise taxes is exceeded only by their desire to stay in office - and to GOPers tempted to succumb to media pressure.

It is also a brake on the governor, who not long after taking office signaled a willingness to entertain new taxes if Californians favored them. The results on Prop. 56 can be con-

sidered the definitive poll on the subject.

The anti-tax mood was also signaled by the results on Proposition 55. These school bonds sprout like mushrooms on every ballot, and are approved almost as routinely. Yet Prop. 55 passed by only the narrowest of margins, reflective of the voters' antipathy to business-as-usual that was expressed so explosively in the Davis recall.

The big losers in this election were the public employees' unions, for whom Gray Davis' election in 1998 ushered in five fat years. Davis and the Democratic Legislature lavished big pay raises and unsustainably generous retirement benefits on state employees. As long as the two-thirds vote requirement allows Republicans to block tax increases, it will be extraordinarily difficult to protect those gains in the faces of a \$15 billion annual deficit. This in turn strengthens Schwarzenegger's hand in his ongoing chess game to check the power of these unions.

Does the election foreshadow a Republican realignment? No. But I do think it spells the end of Democratic domination that was until recently considered an immutable characteristic of the state's political landscape, and it continues the recall's liquefaction of the political status quo. Here's hoping it will give Democratic lawmakers incentive to restrain their tax-and-spend impulses, and caution the squishier elements of California Republicanism that me-tooism is not the road to revival.