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Winners and losers in California

By Shawn Steel

Another election, another set of winners and losers. I'll set the national results aside and focus on how things shook out here in the most-populous state in the union.

Winners

■ **Arnold Schwarzenegger.** The Governor extended a remarkable winning streak that started with his election in the recall, his come-from-behind victories for Propositions 57 and 58 (bonds for California's deficit) and now the vanquishing of Proposition 66, which would have modified the popular three-strikes statute by requiring the third strike to be a violent crime.

Proposition 66 had the support of 76 percent of voters in May. It suffered some slippage during the summer months, but was holding at a healthy 58 percent as late as Oct. 24. Once Schwarzenegger made himself the leading voice opposing Proposition 66, support for the measure began to implode, falling 12 points in a matter of days.

Equally impressive was the governor's strident opposition to the gambling measures, Propositions 68 and 70. Schwarzenegger also looked good by endorsing winners like Proposition 64 (tort reform) and Proposition 67 (telephone tax).

This will strengthen Schwarzenegger's hand in the looming battle with the Democratic Legislature over the deficit and restructuring.

■ **The party system.** California's political parties experienced a near-death experience in the months running up to Election Day, as polls showed Proposition 62, the Louisiana primary model, coasting to victory. Both the Democratic and Republican parties mounted vigorous No-on-62 campaigns — just as they had done in 1996 against an open-primary initiative that passed overwhelmingly anyway.

Proposition 62 would have obliterated the party system, limited voter choices and rendered third parties totally irrelevant. Even Schwarzenegger's endorsement made no difference to voters, who rejected this half-baked reform. The icing on the partisan cake was the 67 percent "Yes" vote for Proposition 60, which guarantees the right of political parties to choose their own nominees.

■ **Free enterprise.** The defeat of Proposition 72, which would have imposed an enormously costly health-care mandate on small businesses, was an important reprieve for California's entrepreneurial culture. It was a near thing: 72 only lost 50.9 percent to 49.1 percent. It is bracing to think so many Californians are willing to jeopardize the state's economic future for the illusion of health care security.

Losers

■ **Arnold Schwarzenegger.** I suppose only a political figure as dominant as the governor could wind up in both categories. He won big in the arena of direct democracy, but Schwarzenegger's bold gamble in legislative races proved a bust. None of the candi-

dates he backed in open seats was elected.

His attempt to unseat Democratic state Sen. Mike Machado also failed as Machado eked out a close win. Republicans made no gains in the Legislature, but at least they now know the governor is willing to expend political capital on their behalf.

■ **Casino Indians.** How the mighty have fallen. Less than two years ago, the casino tribes had it all: status as the state's most powerful special interest and a sympathetic public image. Proposition 70's rejection by 76 percent of voters is a second severe blow to their image and influence. The pro-70 campaign tried to exploit sympathy for the tribes and guilt over their past mistreatment. The only problem is no one feels sorry for wealthy casino Indians anymore. These initiatives just seem greedy.

■ **Trial lawyers.** It's comforting that California voters were able to see through the trial attorneys' predictable resort to deceptive TV ads (Proposition 64) and end the egregious practice of shaking down small businesses with extortion lawsuits. It doesn't end all predations of the worst sort of trial attorneys, but is one more step toward restoring California's job engine.

The Nov. 2 election was a major battle in the ongoing war to divert California from the collectivist course of the Davis years. By and large, freedom moved forward — though it has a long way to go.

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