

Election loss has Republicans seeking common ground with Democrats

By Anthony York, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO – The drubbing Republicans suffered in California elections this year came as no surprise to many GOP activists, who for years have been advocating a shift in direction to avert irrelevancy.

Now, some longtime party stalwarts are questioning whether it is even worth the effort.

Business groups are taking their agendas to Gov. Jerry Brown and a new crop of centrist Democrats in the Legislature, many of whom were elected with financial backing from traditionally Republican groups.

“For the business community, there is a recognition that the best path forward for the state from a governance perspective is with moderate Democrats,” said Rob Stutzman, a Republican consultant who advised the California Chamber of Commerce on a number of legislative races this year.

Although all of the Republicans the chamber backed lost their races, at least seven of the newly elected Democrats in the Assembly had its backing.

That trend could continue in the coming years if Republicans remain stuck in political oblivion. Charles Munger Jr., the wealthy donor who has long called for his party to take a more moderate tack, said at a post-election forum that diminishing numbers and a damaged brand mean “our role as Republicans for awhile will be to choose the best Democrat.”

California’s GOP leaders have wrestled since the mid-1990s

with the problem of adjusting to the shifting state demographics. At that time, Gov. Pete Wilson's crackdown on illegal immigrants led to Latinos backing Democrats in droves.

Subsequent efforts to recalibrate the GOP's stance on a number of issues, including immigration and economics, failed because hard-line conservatives refused to budge.

The state party is weaker now than it has ever been, accounting for fewer than 30 percent of registered voters. No statewide elected officials are Republicans, and the party has become almost a nonentity in the Legislature.

Democrats now hold a two-thirds supermajority in the Assembly and Senate, meaning they can pass taxes and place proposals on the statewide ballot without any Republican support.

Some Republicans say that their party must remain true to its conservative roots. Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, recently wrote: "One of the lessons that we should take from this experience is that capitulation on our values and principles is not the answer."

But others, such as former state Sen. Jim Brulte of Rancho Cucamonga – who has been rumored to be a candidate for state party chairman – said the GOP needed to reach out to new voters, including Latinos and Asians, who now constitute more than one-third of the electorate. Since the mid-1990s, both groups have overwhelmingly supported Democrats.

"Demographics do not have to be destiny," Brulte said. "But if Republicans don't do a better job of reaching out to all Californians, they are going to be."

Brulte said that though there was work to be done at the grass-roots level, the state party's woes are due, in part, to a national party that has opposed immigration reform and been seen as out of touch on a number of issues important to Californians.

Exit polls showed many of the state's new voters were more moderate than the hard-line activists who wield considerable clout within the party.

Moderate Republicans have tried to assert themselves.

In 2009, for example, a handful of Republican lawmakers voted for temporary tax hikes backed by Democrats and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to patch a \$24-billion hole in the state budget.

But the votes cost both GOP legislative leaders their jobs and led to an attempted recall of another Republican assemblyman.

As conservatives retain their grip on the party, their numbers have continued to drop. Some Republicans say the party would be better off focusing on the Democrats.

"It will be easier," said longtime Republican consultant Mike Madrid, "to moderate the Democratic Party than to fix the California Republican Party."