

Nevada GOP primary signals move to middle

By Scott Sonner, AP

RENO – Republican regulars are relishing what they view as a return to normalcy after mainstream candidates defeated more conservative primary challengers in their struggle with tea party activists for control of Nevada's GOP.

Political analysts said it won't be clear until November whether the results of Tuesday's primary were driven most by the hugely popular Gov. Brian Sandoval's coattails, the power of incumbency or a move toward moderation with fading support for the right wing's agenda.

The rift between the mainstream and the more conservative politicians who have assumed state GOP leadership positions was in the spotlight, most notably in the lieutenant governor's race, where Sandoval's backing helped carry Mark Hutchison past the GOP-endorsed Sue Lowden.

The governor's picks also prevailed in a key 4th District congressional primary where first-term Assemblyman Crescent Hardy defeated tea party strategist Niger Innis, and in the Legislature where Senate Minority Leader Michael Roberson of Henderson, Assembly Minority Leader Pat Hickey of Reno and assistant Senate floor leader Ben Kieckhefer of Reno all withstood anti-establishment challenges from the right.

"We saw races where conservatives were trying to prove they were more conservative, and in those elections, it did not go well for tea-party types," said Fred Lokken, a political science professor at Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno.

"It could be the first indications that Republican

conservatives are tiring of the fight," he said. "They may be realizing the split is providing far more damage than any benefit – that you either produce a weakened candidate more likely to lose to a Democratic challenger, or someone who does not work and play within the government process that elected them, and doesn't get anything done for the district or the state."

Republican angst had been growing in Nevada since tea party darling Sharron Angle beat Lowden and Danny Tarkanian for the GOP's U.S. Senate nomination in 2010 before losing to Democratic Sen. Harry Reid, 50 percent to 46 percent.

Mainstream GOP leaders like their prospects for unseating the U.S. Senate's majority leader much better if Sandoval takes him on in 2016. The governor insists he plans to serve a full four-year term if re-elected, but his impressive showing with 90 percent of the vote in Tuesday's primary will only encourage his cheerleaders.

"It is tough to get 90 percent even if you are running unopposed," said Eric Herzik, a political science professor at UNR.

Sandoval's popularity helped scare off serious Democratic challengers in an eight-candidate field, where relative unknown Bob Goodman claimed the nomination with 25 percent of the vote in an embarrassing primary where "none of these candidates" led with 30 percent.

Even Democrats at the polls voiced support for Sandoval.

"As a Democrat, I can't vote for Sandoval, but I feel he's doing a good job and I hope he continues," said Las Vegas resident Celso Adriano, 87, who is a World War II veteran. "I was watching what he's doing. ... He keeps good track of the budget."

Lokken said that should get the attention of state party

leaders, who last year elected Michael McDonald chairman over the Sandoval-backed Robert Uithoven, then later changed the party's endorsement process over the governor's objections.

"The primary was kind of a setback for the attitude the state GOP could go its own way. The governor is for all intents and purposes the leader of the party," Lokken said. "The message back to the state GOP is it probably should be working much harder to work with the sitting governor, who is very popular and pretty mainstream."

For his part, Nevada GOP chairman McDonald immediately issued a post-primary call for unity that he says is the key to winning in November "by practicing the politics of addition, not division."

"I urge you to end the Republican 'civil war' that is so often reported about," he said in an email to party members. "Now is the time that we must band together and truly become the Nevada Republican Party."

Herzik said it's too early to tell if the Republicans' internal wounds are healing. He also cautioned against reading too much into the tea party setbacks.

"If traditional Republicans overstate this, that it means they are not important, that would be a mistake," he said. Herzik said Hutchison and Hardy both were better-financed favorites in their races and the "conservative challenges to Roberson and Kieckhefer in particular, didn't have any legs."

"This kind of conservative backlash was louder than it was actual," Herzik said. "I don't think this election brought peace and harmony to the Republican Party. I don't think there is any guarantee that the disaffected conservative Republicans will fall in line and immediately back their fellow Republicans."