

Democrats lead Valley voter registration battle but still losing election war

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By John Ellis

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A decade ago, Republicans were painting Fresno County red, and the wider central San Joaquin Valley was being portrayed as California's new GOP epicenter — a worthy successor to rock-ribbed conservative bastions Orange County and the Inland Empire.

Then something happened: Democrats clawed out of a registration deficit nearly 25,000 voters deep. By the middle of 2010, they had retaken the lead they had relinquished in 2000. In the latest numbers from the Secretary of State's Office, the Democratic Party registration lead had grown to almost 8,000 voters.

But it's one thing to register Democrats and quite another to translate the registration advantage into election wins.

Three west-side Valley districts where Democrats have significant voter registration advantages — one in Congress, two in the state Senate — are held by Republicans.

Four of the five Fresno County supervisor seats, though officially nonpartisan, are held by Republicans, even though Democrats have registration edges in three of the districts.

And Fresno has a Republican mayor even as Democrats enjoy a registration edge of almost 22,000 voters.

The reasons, several local political watchers said, go far beyond the simple measure of registered voters.

"You can always win a registration fight, but the real work is winning the election, and that means people need to turn out to vote," said former Assembly Member Sarah Reyes, a Fresno Democrat. "And it's hard to turn out Democrats in large numbers."

In the November 2010 election, for instance, half of registered Democrats cast ballots in Fresno County, and their votes made up 40.6% of the total, according to data from the Fresno County Elections Office. In the same election, close to 58% of the county's registered Republicans voted, and those votes made up 46.7% of the total votes cast.

Two years ago, when President Barack Obama sought re-election, the Democrats significantly improved their turnout — almost 62% of those registered in Fresno County voted. The total, however, was still more than six percentage points below the county's Republican voter turnout.

In raw numbers, almost 6,000 more Republicans than Democrats voted in the November 2012 election, even though Democrats had a voter-registration edge of nearly 6,000 voters.

Local Democrats are falling short because they aren't educating members on the importance of voting, Reyes said.

The party needs to work harder at talking to voters about the importance of casting a ballot.

Former Assembly Member Juan Arambula of Fresno, who started in the Legislature as a Democrat before switching to an independent, said that the battle to win elections goes far beyond simply registering voters.

"I think Democrats, while the numbers are there, are still playing catch up in other areas of running races — money and organization," Arambula said.

Candidates need resources to get their message out, he said. But unfortunately for Democrats, the Valley is not a big Democratic donor area. Wealthy farmers and ranchers, as well as business interests, largely contribute campaign cash to Republicans, though a few Democrats, such as Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno, have managed to get some money from these donor areas.

In addition to money, local Republicans have consistently had a better campaign organization than Democrats, which most often is measured in getting voters to the polls.

That's still not enough, said Fresno businessman Michael Der Manouel Jr., who is chairman of the Lincoln Club of Fresno County, a Republican political organization.

"There hasn't been a sustained voter registration program for Republicans in Fresno County in many years, which is why they have lost the advantage," he said. "The current (Republican) central committee has its eye on the ball but will need funding to reverse the trend."

That may be why Democrats say the tide is turning. It just isn't happening overnight.

"There's no doubt that Republicans are living on borrowed time in Fresno," California Democratic Party spokesman Tenoch Flores said. "The turnaround takes time. It's not going to happen overnight, but it's going to happen."

An additional challenge for Democrats is keeping their own voters from casting ballots for Republicans.

"The Central Valley has the least loyal Democrats in the state," said Allan Hoffenblum, a longtime Republican strategist and author of the California Target Book, which tracks the state's elections.

Many of these are old-guard farm-belt Democrats, both fiscally and socially conservative. They were known in the 1980s as "Reagan Democrats" — Democrats who voted for Republican Ronald Reagan for president.

But many Democrats see a changing of the guard in that area, as the Valley's old-style conservative Democrats — which used to hold sway throughout the region — give way to Hispanic Democrats.

Arambula — specifically citing a rise in young, engaged Hispanic voters — feels such a change in the air. It will translate to higher Democratic Party turnout as time goes on.

"Things will change, I think, over time," he said. "It's inevitable."

Some local political activists and analysts — including Republicans — already see it happening. They've seen small gains in Democratic Party voter turnout in some recent elections.

Flores and other Democrats point to last year's defeat of Measure G — Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin's plan to hand trash pickup for the city's 105,000 residential customers to Mid Valley Disposal, a private hauler.

That effort united Democrats and their union allies, and was the kind of coalition that the party needs to form if it is to win more elections, Flores said.

But some Republicans say that coalition isn't as successful as it appears on the surface.

The Measure G vote was close — 50.7% of voters saying "no," and 49.2% "yes."

Republicans say opposition to Swearengin's proposal also came from conservatives and Republicans who believed the trash contract was unfairly awarded or because they didn't like Swearengin. Without that opposition, they say, the measure would likely have passed.

Still, Democrats see it as a template for winning.

"The key to winning is a strong coalition," Flores said. "Democrats in Fresno, as in California, continue to learn to win by forming strong alliances and working with strong coalitions."

If Fresno-area Democrats can close money and organizational gaps with Republicans, and can successfully build and hold the coalitions many in the party feel are keys to victory, it still must field viable candidates.

The GOP excels in strong, engaged elected officials, Der Manouel said. He cited both Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, and Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, though he said these politicians need to be "involved in party building (but are not) because they have not been asked."

It would be helpful for Democrats to have a stable of strong candidates.

Dems stay home

Democrats lead in voter registrations in Fresno County but struggle with poor turnouts.

2010 Primary Election

118,853 total ballots cast:

■ Democrats ■ Republicans

37.7%

52.5%

Total registered that voted:

28%

39.3%

2010 General Election

197,181 total ballots cast:

40.6%

46.7%

Total registered that voted:

50.1%

57.6%

2012 Primary Election

112,682 total ballots cast:

37.7%

50.7%

Total registered that voted:

27%

37.1%

2012 General Election

254,167 total ballots cast:

40.1%

42.4%

Total registered that voted:

61.8%

68.1%

Source: Fresno County Registrar of Voters

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rolls, we will not be successful or we will continue to struggle to be successful."

Democrats are excited by Amanda Renteria, the Woodlake native who left a Senate chief-of-staff job to return to the Valley and take on Valadao. But it's not even certain she will challenge Valadao.

She first must emerge from a three-way primary election with Valadao and another Democrat — John Hernandez. Only the top two will advance to the November general election, and Valadao almost certainly will be one of those.

Many Democrats are searching for the next Costa or Assembly Member and state Sen. George Zenovich — a party standard bearer who can rally the troops. Often times, these political careers start at the school board or city council.

Could that be a Fresno City Council member like Blong Xiong, who is running for Fresno County supervisor, or fellow member Oliver Baines, who is seeking a second term on the council? Or Fresno Unified trustee Luis Chavez, who is challenging state Sen. Andy Vidak, R-Hanford?

It doesn't help when a potential star like Michael Rubio quits. Rubio, a moderate Bakersfield Democrat, left the state Senate a year ago to work for Chevron Corp.

Vidak won the special election for the seat.

But it all starts with getting people to cast a ballot.

"We can take back that Senate seat," Reyes said, referring to Vidak. "We can win (Valadao's) congressional seat. That's not about a candidate, it's about doing your duty as a voter."

Unfortunately, she said, Democrats are telling her the focus again will be on registering new voters, and not on getting the ones already registered to the polls.

"I think we have to continually always try and register people," she said, "but if we do not turn out those who are already on the

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6320, jellis@fresnobee.com or @johnellis24 on Twitter.

KEY DATES

Dec. 27: Candidates began gathering signatures for in-lieu petitions to avoid paying filing fees. Judicial candidates had until Feb. 5; everyone else had until Feb. 20.

Feb. 10: Candidate filing began; runs through March 7 (extended to March 12 for races where the incumbent isn't running for re-election)

May 5: First day to vote by mail (also the day most sample ballots are mailed)

May 19: Last day to register to vote

May 27: Last day to request a vote-by-mail ballot by mail

June 3: Primary Election Day

Nov. 4: General Election Day

ELECTION OFFICES

Fresno County: 2221 Kern St., Fresno; details [online](#) or (559) 600-VOTE (8683)

Tulare County: 5951 S. Mooney Blvd., Visalia; details [online](#) or (559) 624-7300

Kings County: 1400 W. Lacey Blvd., Hanford; details [online](#) or (559) 582-3211, ext. 4401

Madera County: 200 W. Fourth St., Madera; details [online](#) or (559) 675-7720

Merced County: 2222 M St., Merced; details [online](#) or (209) 385-7541

Mariposa County: 4982 10th St., Mariposa; details [online](#) or (209) 966-2007