

Dan Walters: Scandal and conflict sour legislative session

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When the Legislature's 2014 session began about three months ago, the Capitol's dominant Democrats and their allies had high hopes that it would bear legislative fruit – with good reason.

Democrats held “supermajorities” in both legislative houses, the state's budget was in balance, and an improving economy was generating surplus revenue that could finance plans for new spending on services to children, the poor and the disabled.

Even the Legislature's public approval, which had fallen to as low as 10 percent in the Field Poll a few years earlier, was on the rise.

Democratic ambitions were expressed in hundreds of bills, many drafted by labor unions, environmental groups, consumer advocates and personal-injury lawyers, that collectively laid out a liberal election-year agenda.

However, as the Legislature wound up a couple of weeks of intensive committee hearings Thursday and left town for an 11-day spring break, the atmosphere had soured.

Three Democratic senators facing criminal charges had been suspended, thereby erasing the upper house's supermajority and dooming some of the most ambitious measures.

The California Chamber of Commerce, which annually singles out the highest-profile liberal bills and labels them “job killers,” scored a number of victories without firing a shot. Eight tax-increase measures on the 26-bill list that required two-thirds votes stalled out with the demise of the Senate's supermajority, giving the chamber and other business interests a head start on their annual wrangle with liberal groups.

That demise, moreover, restores a modicum of influence for minority Republicans on other measures requiring two-thirds votes – such as a water bond for the November ballot, or Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal for a rainy-day fund to soak up the surging revenue that many of his fellow Democrats would prefer to spend.

The conflict between Brown and liberals over whether to ramp up health and welfare spending and launch pricey new programs such as “transitional kindergarten” looms as the year’s biggest uncertainty.

Democratic unity in both houses, meanwhile, has been fractured by a conflict over a constitutional amendment to allow affirmative action in college admissions, pitting Asian American Democrats against black and Latino Democrats.

The amendment had cleared the Senate in a display of supermajority hegemony earlier in the year, but was sidetracked in the Assembly when Asian American legislators turned against it.

Finally, the Field Poll was in the midst of a voter survey when the last and most sensational of the three criminal cases became public. Prior to then, the Legislature’s approval rating was increasing, but when that case hit, touching off an intense debate over how the three senators would be treated, approval turned downward.

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