

Opinion: Democratic Senate duel affects tenor of Capitol

By Dan Walters

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Democrats have controlled both houses of the California Legislature for nearly a half-century, with the exception of 1996 when Republicans briefly ran the Assembly, and Democratic hegemony will continue indefinitely, perhaps forever.

That said, partisan dominance begets factiousness and the real nature of the Legislature – the thrust of what eventually emerges as legislation – is determined by which Democratic factions, or coalitions of factions, call the shots.

It's a rough form of multi-party parliamentary government, somewhat akin to the post-election coalition formation now underway in Israel.

The tenor of Democratic legislators is particularly pivotal in the perpetual conflict between business interests and the "Big 4" of unions, environmentalists, consumer advocates and personal injury attorneys.

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Gov. Jerry Brown, center, walks with Ana Matosantos, former director of California Department of Finance, left, Michael Cohen, then-Chief Deputy Director of Department of Finance, and ex-adviser Steve Glazer, right, to a meeting with the League of California Cities in 2011. | Hector Amezcua hamezcua@sacbee.com



Democrats Steve Glazer, Susan Bonilla proceed to Senate runoff

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Each year, the Big 4 introduce their agendas, and each year businesses concentrate on defeating or neutralizing bills they consider most objectionable – most of the time successfully. In between legislative sessions, both try to elect Democrats they believe will tilt their way.

The last couple of election cycles have been particularly confrontational because the modification of term limits meant that new legislators elected in 2012 and beyond could remain in their seats for up to 12 years.

Business scored some noteworthy gains in 2012's Assembly elections, helping as many as 12 Democrats win seats, including two who unseated union-backed incumbents. And Steve Glazer, who ran Jerry Brown's 2010 campaign for governor, advised the state Chamber of Commerce on its 2012 strategy.

That earned Glazer the implacable enmity of union leaders, who went all out in 2014 to deny him an Assembly seat in Contra Costa and Alameda counties. Glazer lost in the primary to a union-backed Democrat, but a Republican, with Glazer's support, captured the seat in November.

Glazer is running again, seeking a vacant state Senate seat in a special election. Union support was divided between two other Democrats. Glazer finished first in this week's primary and will face Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla in a May 19 runoff.

Given the makeup of the district – affluent suburbia – Glazer is probably lucky to face Bonilla rather than the third-place finisher, former Assemblywoman Joan Buchanan. But there is an asterisk on that appraisal.

Bonilla chairs the Assembly Business and Professions Committee, which handles legislation affecting medical providers and other deep-pocket interests, and they thought it expedient to spend heavily on Bonilla's behalf.

They and unions will ramp up pro-Bonilla, anti-Glazer spending for the runoff, and the question is whether business interests that have backed Glazer will do the same, trying to bolster the ranks of business-friendly Democrats for skirmishes with the Big 4.

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