

# Dan Walters: Governor fighting two-front war against Democrats, rightists

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is, in a sense, fighting a two-front political war - not only seeking dominance over Democrats in the Capitol with a series of flanking maneuvers but trying to remake what has been a very conservative state Republican Party in his own ideologically centrist image.

Were he to succeed on both fronts, Schwarzenegger could have a dramatic impact on California politics that would last beyond his governorship. And the key to both is the millions of moderate voters who have felt alienated from both a very conservative Republican Party and a very liberal Democratic Party, but who have tended, however reluctantly, to favor the latter in recent elections.

Self-described moderates make up about half of California's electorate and once favored the GOP when the prevailing issues were ones of self-protection, such as the Cold War and crime. But as those issues faded in importance, and social conflicts, such as abortion and gun control, took center stage, moderate voters drifted to the Democrats, who captured every statewide office and strong majorities in the Legislature and the congressional delegation.

Republican moderates argued that the party needed to move to the center to regain relevance and noted that Democrats' share of voter registration was continuing to drop. But to conservatives, fidelity to their principles and control of the party were more important than winning elections.

Democrats, meanwhile, became so confident that moderate voters would remain with them that they began drifting to the left, championing causes - such as gay marriage and drivers' licenses for illegal immigrants - that alienated centrists. The two-party gerrymander of legislative districts in 2001 accelerated the trend, making it nearly impossible for moderates of either party to win legislative seats.

The dominance of the ideological extremists in both parties created a vacuum into which Schwarzenegger stepped in 2003, leading the drive to recall Democratic Gov. Gray Davis, who had tried to straddle the ideological middle but who was forced to the left by elements of his own party as his popularity waned. To this day, Davis apologists blame the Democratic left for undermining his position and making him vulnerable to the recall - although Davis' passive approach to crises was probably the more important cause of his political demise.

Schwarzenegger, already famous from his long career as a bodybuilder and action movie star, demonstrated an uncanny - and to Democrats, frightening - ability to appeal to Democrats and independents with his pledge to clean up the budget deficit and other messes in Sacramento. But his first year as governor fell well short of success as he confronted the ideological schism of the Legislature and the power of Democratic interest groups - especially public employee unions - to block movement.

Although Republican rightists are highly suspicious of Schwarzenegger's liberal social positions, his popularity - and the simple fact that without him, the GOP is bereft of candidates - has kept them relatively quiet.

On Friday, Schwarzenegger made thrusts along both fronts. He nominated an ideological clone, former state Sen. Bruce McPherson, as secretary of state, and he marshaled the state Republican Party for his battle with the Democrats over four ballot measures that would undercut the Democrats' control of the Capitol and hit public employee unions in the pocketbook.

By nominating McPherson to succeed scandal-encased Democrat Kevin Shelley, Schwarzenegger is both giving moderates new stature in the Republican Party and daring Democrats to reject someone who is universally liked and respected in the Capitol, and who has strong credentials for the position. Were Democrats to block confirmation, Schwarzenegger would use it as ammunition in his ballot war.

"Those poor little guys," Schwarzenegger said of the Democrats in a speech to the state GOP convention. "They're trying very hard. ... They may have a wonderful dream about that. But the reality is very sad for them. The reality is that they're not going to get my numbers down, and we're going to get our message out there, and we're going to go all the way, and we're going to win this year with all four reforms."