

Editorial: Tuition freeze carries message

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Our view: There's a strategy behind the Republican proposal to freeze tuition at the state's public universities and community colleges.

An intriguing question is how Republicans in Sacramento will remain relevant the next two years when Democrats have a supermajority in both houses of the Legislature. We saw the glimpse of an answer already this week: by embarrassing Democrats if they aren't willing to back up their campaign rhetoric.

Two Republicans — one in the Assembly, one in the Senate — introduced bills this week that would freeze tuition at all of California's public universities and colleges.

State legislators have said for years they're chagrined by frequent double-digit tuition increases in the California State University and University of California systems. Democrats in the Legislature campaigned for Proposition 30 last fall, stating that it would stem the tide. Voters bought it and passed the proposition, which will raise taxes "temporarily" for seven years.

That's exactly how long the proposed laws would freeze tuition. After Gov. Jerry Brown and other politicians lobbied students at Chico State University and elsewhere, it seems only fair.

But for those who were listening, Proposition 30 proponents never made a promise about holding the line on tuition. They just said the cuts to higher education would be deep if Proposition 30 failed.

The proposed laws — by Assemblyman Jeff Gorell, R-Camarillo, and Sen. Anthony Cannella,

R-Ceres — should be popular. Certainly college students, future college students and families with children would all support a tuition freeze.

Yet Republican legislators across the board did not support the tax hikes in Proposition 30. So why would they suddenly jump to the side of those voting for Proposition 30? Because Democrats would appear duplicitous if they don't support the tuition freeze. It puts Democrats on the record: Do they support students or not?

University officials always leave the door open for future tuition increases. They are quick to say they need more money — either in the form of increased funding from the state or, failing that, higher tuition from students.

The governor today is expected to announce increased funding for higher education. If that's the case, we think students finally deserve a break from tuition increases.

But here's what we predict will happen: Democrats will ignore the bills. As the majority party, they will never let the tuition freeze bills come to a vote. Republicans will say, "We introduced a bill to freeze tuition, but Democrats wouldn't let us vote on it." And Democrats? They'll ignore it and hope the issue goes away. That's what happens in a state of one-party rule.