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Some Glue for the Delegation

COMMENTARY

California elects 52 members of the U.S. House, nearly one-eighth of the total of 435. That is a potent force, but they don't always pull together. California's delegation represents a broad variety of interests and is divided almost down the middle along a partisan line: 28 Republicans and 24 Democrats.

Still, there are common bonds. It was encouraging to see 39 members of the California team gather in Washington the other day for an amicable get-acquainted session with the new governor, Democrat Gray Davis. "This initial effort is very welcome and it's a great beginning," said Rep. Jerry Lewis of Redlands, chairman of the California Republicans.

If the delegation works together, there is a far greater chance that Davis can win from Washington the \$432 million he is seeking this year in additional federal aid to help balance the state budget. This will not be easy. Davis' predecessor, Republican Pete

Wilson, repeatedly demanded such aid from the Clinton administration, with limited success. A Democratic governor is more likely to have White House support, but the GOP controls Congress, which must appropriate the money. Without strong bipartisan support from California's own members, the prospect for winning the extra money is slim. California needs to push the case with unity and vigor.

The Californians also will have opportunities to work together on a fair reallocation of federal aid to education and changes in the Healthy Families program.

There is a perception that the delegation has been relatively inept because it is so fractured. The roots of this view lie in the 1980s, when California was embarrassed by the loss of several critical federal projects to other states that maximized their clout within Congress. That led to the creation in the early 1990s of the nonpartisan

California Institute for Federal Policy Research, working in support of the delegation. The institute staff, under director Tim Ransdell, helps coordinate issues and provides support material in concert with aides to Lewis and the Democratic caucus chairman, Sam Farr of Monterey.

In fact, the delegation has worked much more cohesively the past two years. In some cases, all 52 members have signed letters of support for issues of special California concern. If Republicans remain intent on building a record of achievement in the wake of the Clinton impeachment, there are prospects of even closer cooperation this year. For his part, Davis must build trust by fulfilling his promise to work with the GOP members. With those elements in place, this could be a good year in Washington for California.

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