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California Delegation May Lead by Example

by Tim Ransdell, Op-Ed, November 17, 2000

All eyes of the nation gaze transfixed on the exquisitely complex kabuki dance under way in Florida's courts, streets and halls of government. But while this legal circus offers a watershed moment for history teachers and politics junkies, it foreshadows a monumental crisis of legitimacy for whichever candidate limps haggardly across the finish line.

Who can fill the vast vacuum of national leadership left by this power crisis?

The general answer is Congress. A more specific answer, if cards are played right, might just be California.

The tug-of-war between Congress and the White House is a hallowed Washington tradition, and an enfeebled presidency can only increase the stature of the legislative branch in the contest for federal hegemony.

But these two institutions' structures are diametrically opposite. Under our Constitution, a presidential contest is a winner-take-all affair, and either George W. Bush or Al Gore -- eventually -- will exert sole dominion over the nation's executive branch. To the victor go the spoils.

Last week's congressional election, on the other hand, was simply yet another

scheduled skirmish in ongoing give-and-take warfare. Republicans have governed with a dozen-vote majority for two years now, and January's advantage will be smaller still -- the narrowest margin in generations. The game of inches is turning to millimeters.

Possession of the speaker's gavel and dibs on the big chair in committee rooms are indisputably important. But governing with a majority that can be counted on one's fingers is vastly different from the veto-proof supremacy each party has enjoyed at some point in history.

Successful navigation of policy priorities through a fragilely held majority demands some measure of inclusiveness. Leaders of the House to be sworn in on Jan. 3 should think "coalition governance" rather than "rule by fiat." In an ordinary year, heavy handedness by the majority is inadvisable; next year, it may be entirely impossible. Only through bipartisanship does the next Congress stand a chance for productivity.

Here, somewhat surprisingly, California's representatives can teach their congressional brethren a thing or two.

While Washington is a perennially partisan town, Californians of late have learned the importance of inter-party alliances, and they

know when to use them. In part, this is training learned on the job. Success breeds success, and California's congressional delegation -- led by Republican Jerry Lewis of Redlands and Democrat Sam Farr of Carmel -- have undertaken dozens of bipartisan ventures in recent years, many of them victorious.

The state's delegation to Washington, which will include 32 Democrats and 20 Republicans, has taken to heart the lesson that bipartisanship gets results.

Every California member of Congress urged FEMA to soften its zealous demand that all public entities buy high-priced disaster insurance. A strategic bipartisan collaboration by the Golden State's congressional leaders was the key to raising the limit on skilled worker visas sought by technology and other industries. A unified California has for several years maximized funding for a criminal alien incarceration program -- nearly half of whose funds come to the state. And San Diego's own bipartisan delegation is giving a crash course to the rest of the state as it collectively seeks answers to electricity market woes.

For many, bipartisan alacrity is behavior learned well before arrival in Washington. In the 1998 elections, four of California's five new members of Congress had served in the state Legislature, a body where term limits -- a peculiar and problematic innovation in many respects -- serves at least to encourage those who would succeed to seek advice and support from all sides. After this month's contest, three more new House members will have honed their policymaking skills in the State Capitol chambers.

The ability to compromise and conspire with their opposing party counterparts give us a

strategic weapon against able rivals from other states. Fractiousness among Californians once allowed pillagers from the "other 49" to swipe Washington goodies from us; a more united congressional delegation now seals off many of those access points.

Our sheer size, of course, will continue to make the Golden State look like a pot of gold to out-of-state legislators seeking geographic advantage here or money for a pet project there. Californians in Washington must remain vigilant against opportunistic encroachment. But they now have a solid track record of teamwork to take into the new legislative year. And that year promises a Congress whose fragile majority could be guided -- even dominated -- by a unified, collaborative, strategic California squad.

Ransdell is executive director of the California Institute for Federal Policy Research, a bipartisan, Washington-based nonprofit which advises the state's congressional delegation.

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