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Who Wants California?

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 10, 2010 NCR Today

Harold Meyerson is spot-on in his analysis [1]of the difficulties facing newly nominated GOP candidates Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina. Both women spent gobs of money to win their primary elections in California, and they have gobs to spend. But, money is not enough to win a GOP primary in the Golden State. You also have to move so far to the right, it is nearly impossible to get back to the center by November.

Both Whitman and Fiorina seem like the kind of centrist Republicans who might get elected in California. It is difficult to remember, but in 1979, the year the Rev. Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, Jacob Javits was the Republican Senator from New York. California?s incumbent governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, is not a fire-breathing conservative but, as Meyerson points out, he did not face a primary battle. Meyerson also correctly points out that the issue on which both Fiorina?s and Whitman?s caving to the right will cost them the most is immigration. Republicans have struggled to win in California ever since their embrace of Proposition 187 in the early 1990s, a measure that restricted immigrant rights and was subsequently struck down by the courts. The immigration of conservative evangelicals from Appalachia and the lower Midwest to California fueled the growth of the conservative movement, but it pales in comparison to the growth in Latino voters.

Meyerson does not ask a prior question, however. Who in their right mind would want to be Governor of California. The state is ungovernable. Its bizarre form of plebiscitary democracy has created insuperable hurdles ? super-majorities to raise taxes, for example ? to actual governance. Conservatives tend to forget that the first thing their hero Ronald Reagan did when he became Governor of California in 1967 was pass the largest tax increase in the state?s history to balance the books which out-going Gov. Pat Brown has left in dismal shape. Reagan was never one to let conservative principle get in the way of the necessity of governance, and having campaigned on a platform of smaller government and lower taxes he nonetheless pushed the tax increase through a reluctant legislature. Today, due to a popularly voted amendment to the Constitution, such an increase would require a two-thirds vote of the legislature. And you thought the filibuster was a hurdle!

So, Whitman and Fiorina will spend their millions but I doubt that either of them will win. This does not necessarily bode well for the Democrats over the long run ? until California becomes governable, through constitutional changes, who would want to be Governor? But, next year, when the Census results are in, the state of California, will have to carve out districts for their congressional delegation, the largest in the nation. Unless the GOP captures the governorship or one house of the legislature, they will not have a seat at the table. And, that is a recipe for electoral disaster for ten years!

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/09/AR2010060904870.html