A rising number of Democratic voters

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

When I was narrowly elected to Congress in 1962, the good folk of La Mesa, Calif., were not jumping for joy. I lost that suburban city by 1,200 votes, the most lopsided margin in my entire San Diego County district against sending a Democrat to Washington.

I reasoned that my chances in the next election might well turn on changing minds in La Mesa. A group that ran the local Helix Irrigation District persuaded me that maybe it was something in the water these people were drinking - too much chlorine, to be precise. So with several months' hard work and a little luck, I wangled more than $1 million in federal money to help build a filtration plant. That might have helped. The next time 'round I lost La Mesa by only 400 votes. Though its water is purer, their town has remained a Republican redoubt until - well, until almost this very moment.

As of May 2008 (and here, if you please, a drum-roll) for the first time in memory of mortal man or woman, the Democratic Party has overtaken and passed La Mesa's GOP registration totals. Not by much, to be sure, but we all know the mills of the gods grind slowly. Here are the current totals:

Democrats: 10,789

Republicans: 10,623

Decline to state: 5,702

I cite this shift of loyalties not with elation, and certainly not in self-adulation for something I did 45 years ago. Back then, I merely laid down a bunt advancing the runner to second. No, what's happening now in La Mesa, and in hundreds of other places across the nation, is a harbinger of the political switch that virtually assures a new direction of U.S. policy come January 2009.

Look where we may - north, south, east or west - and the picture is almost monotonously the same. In the traditionally swing state of Oregon, awaiting the last big presidential primary, Democrats now lead Republicans by a whopping 118,000. Marion County, containing the state's capital, Salem, has registered roughly 4,000 new Democrats since January, while Republicans added a scant 200.

In the past nine primary states alone - including Pennsylvania and Ohio - Democrats obtained more than a million new registrants. In the final week before Pennsylvania's deadline for signing up, that state alone added

33,281 against 1,808 GOP applicants.

Not all those new Democrats, of course, would be first-time voters. Many have simply switched parties - more than 10,000 in Colorado alone. (Colorado once was deemed a reliably Republican state.)

Change would seem to be in the air. And, bringing its signs right up to the moment, voters in Louisiana's 6th Congressional District as recently as last Sunday chose a Democrat to represent them for the first time since the 1970s.

It is a given among political observers that new voters register with the party whose candidates they are likeliest to support. They may be drawn chiefly by personalities at the top of the ticket - for president, as is now the case, or by a contest for governor. In the long history of our republic, a new U.S. president usually is joined by congressional majorities of his own party.

Today's registration trend suggests that we could shortly see Democratic congressional majorities comparable to those accompanying Franklin Roosevelt's presidential sweep in 1932. That 73rd Congress resulted from public dissatisfaction with the Hoover administration's failure to the deal with Depression woes that saw unemployment rates as high as 30 percent. It was not yet the "New Deal" Congress eager to support economic reforms that the new president had not yet articulated.

Problems of the present Democratic Congress lie only partly in the House, whose leadership has failed to begin termination of the war in Iraq, as promised in the 2006 campaign.

The Democratic leadership's most serious failure stems from its insufficient numbers in the Senate. The rules there require 60 votes to move any legislation that the leadership of either party finds objectionable. Beyond the presidency itself, therefore, the most important thing to look for in November will be the number of new Democratic senators. Because of the three or four moderate Republican incumbents who'll likely vote to join them, 57 or 58 Democratic members should be enough to get things moving again.

Oh yes, and anyone who fears that the Democratic nomination fight still under way will help re-elect Republicans should be reminded about cats. We're often under the impression cats are fighting, but next thing you know there are more cats.

Yes, even in La Mesa.

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