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State resisted political currents

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Like many of my fellow Californians, I awoke Wednesday morning, rubbed the sleep from my eyes, and discovered that our state had seceded from the union.

Anti-incumbent tidal wave? We reached back 27 years to find an incumbent governor to embrace. Small government? By passing Proposition 25, we started to unlock the manacles preventing the state Legislature from actually passing a budget in the year it's supposed to take effect.

Removing the dead hand of regulation so the private sector can pump up its job-creating chest and bellow? By rejecting Proposition 23, we proclaimed our belief that one can be both green and growth-oriented -- or at least that it's unwise to take advice on environmental regulations from the oil industry.

That conservative vision of the American electorate as an ethnically homogeneous, right-of-center country? Not true in the U.S. generally, even less true in California. Nationally, the nonwhite vote last week was about 22% of the electorate (down from nearly 27% in 2008); in this state it was 38%.

Hispanic voters constituted 8% of the national electorate, more than 24% of the California electorate. But across the nation, the Hispanic population is the fastest-growing population group, and young, with a median age of 27.4, compared with 36.8 for the population as a whole.

That suggests this voting bloc will become increasingly important in future elections. So we can say to the rest of the country (paraphrasing a failed Senate candidate whose name I've already forgotten): "We're not California ... we're you." If any politicians out there have any doubts about the consequences of toying with Hispanic voters, I'll be happy to pass on Meg Whitman's phone number.

That's not to say that California was entirely immune from other political currents sweeping the nation. "Green" politics, meaning greenbacks, the long green. Whitman's \$140-million-plus gubernatorial campaign set a mark for lunatic spending that mere mortals will shoot for in vain, while inscribing her name, along with that of Carly Fiorina, to the monument to wrecked high-priced California campaigns at the side of the road.

While the spending by Whitman and Fiorina drew most of the attention, corporate America was emptying its own pockets to sway California voters -- and doing a better job of it than the candidates. It's true that voters rejected Proposition 23, which would have overturned the state's greenhouse gas regulations, despite a multimillion-dollar war chest provided by the oil industry and the still-mysterious Adam Smith Foundation.

But corporate California did get its way on two other initiatives. One was Proposition 24, which would have rolled back corporate tax breaks worth an estimated \$1.3 billion a year and which was defeated 58% to 42%. Industry fought the initiative with about \$13.5 million in donations (countered by about \$13 million on the "yes" side, mostly from public employee unions).

The basic pitch of the "No on 24" gang was that rolling back the tax break would chiefly hurt small businesses; its principal committee billed itself partially as "a coalition of taxpayers, employers, small businesses."

I wonder where those small-business coalition members were hiding themselves -- the smallest business I could find on the list of contributors on file at the secretary of state's office is Gen-Probe, a San Diego biotech company that had \$500 million in sales last year. Every other contributing business reported 2009 sales of more than \$1 billion, and some -- Cisco Systems, General Electric, Walt Disney Co., Viacom -- much more.

The No on 24 campaign was not the only sign that the electoral process has entered a new era of corporate ownership. There was the campaign for Proposition 26, which passed 53% to 47%. This initiative requires a two-thirds vote of each house of the Legislature to impose certain fees and would roll some back.

The campaign's ads might have left you thinking the measure applies to those nuisance fees that have been proliferating during the state's budget crisis -- fees for users of the state parks, for public garbage dumps, etc. Or, at least, they didn't go out of their way to specify they're talking about regulatory fees such as those charged restaurants, beverage distributors and oil and gas firms to cover the cost of health and environmental inspections, recycling programs and toxic waste cleanups. User fees aren't affected by the measure.

To learn the truth, you'd have to follow the money all the way back to the campaign contribution statement, where you'd find that of the \$13.2 million raised through Oct. 16, a total of \$8 million came from the petroleum, beverage and restaurant industries.

This campaign was joined with an unsuccessful drive to defeat Proposition 25, which reduces the legislative vote necessary to enact a state budget to a simple majority, rather than two-thirds. This measure was attacked by a TV commercial so childish and misleading that it was easy to mistake it for a Meg Whitman attack ad.

In any case the voters, possibly swayed by a provision under which lawmakers forfeit salaries and expenses for every day the budget misses a June 15 deadline, passed Proposition 25 by a vote of 55% to 45%.

The enactment of Proposition 25 may be the best example of how Californians steered a new course in this election. Until now, the voters' inclination has been mostly in the other direction -- pass more spending programs, cut more taxes, take more authority away from the Legislature and blame the lawmakers for their inability to get anything done. This is the first initiative in recent memory to give legislators more fiscal authority.

It's not an unalloyed victory for common sense. On the same ballot, voters approved a measure preventing Sacramento from seizing local revenues to balance the state budget. That's not a terrible idea, as government works better when local authorities have control of their funds, but it does shrink the Legislature's authority just a little bit more in the old style.

Still, you take your encouragement where you find it. Proposition 25 is a step in the right direction. If our new/old governor, Jerry Brown, can use it as the foundation of a campaign to dismantle some of the other insane provisions of law that have crippled California government, including term limits and budgeting by initiative, maybe we'll regain our luster as a national trendsetter.

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Michael Hiltzik's column appears Sundays and Wednesdays. Reach him at mhiltzik@latimes.com, read past columns at latimes.com/hiltzik, check out [facebook.com/hiltzik](https://www.facebook.com/hiltzik) and follow [@latimeshiltzik](https://twitter.com/latimeshiltzik) on Twitter.

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