

David Hadley: State Democrats' one-party reign with Brown won't last

By David Hadley

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When future California historians try to understand our state government's slow-motion train wreck, they won't lack for juicy material from 2011.

Jerry Brown returned to the Governor's Office 28 years after he previously had the gig. Budget deficits continued despite one of the highest tax burdens in the country. The South Bay experienced the new "jungle" (or open) primary elections twice in 2011 (special elections to succeed Jenny Oropeza in the 28th state senate district and Jane Harman in the 36th U.S. Congressional district). California attempted -- but seemingly failed -- to stop politicians from manipulating the redistricting process for their own gain.

But the real political news in 2011 was that California once again proved the maxim that those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it. We took our third shot at one-party Democratic state government in 36 years.

We did it in style, too. In November 2010, while voters nationwide were handing governors' mansions, state houses and Congressional seats to Republicans in record numbers, California voters doubled down on blue. In 2011, every California statewide elected officeholder was a Democrat, from governor to insurance commissioner.

Combine this vice grip on the executive branch with 40 years of Democratic control of the state legislature, and we are living in one of the bluest states in the country. But Californians have tried the one-party road before -- twice -- and it

didn't end well either time.

When Ronald Reagan stepped down as governor after two terms in 1974, California elected none other than Jerry Brown to succeed him. Brown immediately became a national figure due to California's status as the most-populous state, Brown's youth and his new-age liberalism.

He served two terms, but his time in office wasn't exactly a liberal triumph. Voter outrage over rising property taxes led to the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. And public anger over Brown's uber-liberal state Supreme Court appointees ultimately led to the recall of Chief Justice Rose Bird and two other justices.

And as we have all learned more recently, Brown also left California voters an expensive booby trap during his first stint as governor. In 1979 Brown awarded collective bargaining rights to state employees, a step that even liberal lions like Franklin Roosevelt had opposed. How's that working out for the state of California now?

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Ultimately, "Governor Moonbeam" and his party's liberal agenda wore thin with voters, and Brown was succeeded by Republican governors for 16 years.

Then, in 1998 we awarded the governor's mansion to Gray Davis. Since Democrats retained control of the state legislature, state power shifted decisively back into their hands.

That was a pretty good year for the Democrats to take control. California was awash in a flood of tax revenue springing from strong economic growth and dot-com capital gains taxes.

Property values were rising rapidly, allowing Davis and the Democrats to abide by Proposition 13 while keeping expensive promises to their favorite interest groups. It was during Davis' tenure that the state made many of the pension deals that are now bankrupting it.

Davis was re-elected in 2002. Only one year later, he was ousted by voters disgusted by his pay-to-play patronage, mismanagement of the dot-com budget bust and flawed electricity deregulation. Davis' recall ushered in the administration of Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose primary achievement, besides fending off some of the more extreme bills coming out of the Democratic statehouse, was temporarily destroying the state Republican party.

So to misquote Britney Spears, "Oops, we did it again" in 2011. With Jerry Brown back in the governor's mansion, where does total Democratic control of Sacramento leave us?

If history is any guide, the Democrats will overplay their hand and voters will have no choice but to restore a check on the seemingly permanent Democratic legislative majority. The only questions are: When will this happen? Over what issues will the Democratic coalition crack up? And what will the Republicans have to offer California voters when it happens?

Those are the topics for 2012 and beyond.

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