

## California Legislature curbs spending impulse

*With Gov. Brown preaching fiscal prudence, California Democrats resist the urge to go on a spending spree, driven by a need to protect moderates.*

**Patrick McGreevy and Melanie Mason, Los Angeles Times, 9-15-13**

SACRAMENTO — With a rebounding economy and a \$6-billion tax hike approved by Californians last fall, the Legislature's freshly minted Democratic supermajority began the year with the money and power to reverse years of deficit-driven budget cuts and derailed political priorities.

But even with a two-thirds majority for the first time in more than a century, the 2013 session featured no spending binge and no recalibration of state law to the far left, despite the dire predictions of some conservatives and the hopes of some liberals.

Calls for a hike in car fees and for an overhaul of Proposition 13, the landmark property tax initiative, went unheeded. A proposed moratorium on oil companies' controversial "fracking" practices foundered.

Even with a projected revenue surplus in the billions, lawmakers acquiesced to Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown's demand to delay restoration of welfare programs thrashed by years of deficits, instead socking away \$1.1 billion in reserves.

"Everybody knew they were being watched," said Barbara O'Connor, a public affairs specialist and professor emeritus of political communication at Cal State Sacramento.

The temperance was driven largely by a need to protect the party's moderates. Their victories in a handful of Republican-leaning districts handed the Democrats their bare supermajority — an edge that gave the party enough power to raise taxes without a single Republican vote. Doing so, however, might have meant sacrificing at least some of those moderates in next year's elections.

And Brown repeatedly preached fiscal prudence, threatening to nip any spending spree before California's economy recovered more firmly. The unified restraint on spending, however, is not expected to last, given the pent-up demand to restore cuts made over the years in social and healthcare programs held dear by Democrats.

"They delivered on the promises they made at the beginning of the year because they were calculated, conservative promises," O'Connor said. "I think that will erupt. [Lawmakers] will be going home to their districts and dealing with problems of their communities."

Still, for those seeking to affirm a view of California as a land awash in tie-dyed, unionized liberals, the Legislature produced enough nuggets to sustain its leftist reputation.

Democrats pushed through a hike in the minimum wage to \$10 an hour — the highest in the nation. They moved to make driver's licenses widely available to immigrants in the country illegally and to allow legal, non-citizen immigrants to serve on juries.

They approved overtime pay for nannies and home health aides. California's strict gun laws became stricter: Nine gun-control bills passed, including a ban on the sale of rifles with detachable magazines.

Brown uncharacteristically weighed in on a few major bills as they traveled through the Senate and Assembly, supporting the minimum-wage increase and driver's license measures, for example.

"When things get a bit stalled, I like to provide a bit of catalyst," Brown said Friday.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) said it was a relief to have some room to legislate after years of budget problems.

"Now that we have gotten over that hump and we are not dealing with endless budget deficits, we now have the ability to actually build and create, and that's what we did this year," Steinberg told reporters. "It's a much better era beginning here in California than what we have been dealing with during the past half decade."

In addition to an on-time budget this year, Steinberg said, lawmakers' accomplishments included more money for vocational education, mental health services and scholarships for middle-class college students.

Other beneficiaries of Sacramento's one-party rule were Democrat-friendly public employee unions, which received new contracts with pay raises. State prison guards won a guarantee that they will be used if the state leases a private prison in California City, one of the options Brown will present to federal judges who have ordered him to alleviate crowding.

Teachers unions won a measure to streamline the discipline and dismissal process for their members, passed by the Legislature over the objections of school boards and administrators.

But the year was a disappointment for environmentalists — also a reliable Democratic constituency.

The oil industry beat back bills that would have stopped hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, at least temporarily. One measure passed that would require a permitting process, public notice of such oil-extraction practices and a study of possible regulations, but only after lobbyists persuaded lawmakers to scale back proposals for stricter regulation.

"It was the year of the oily," said Kathryn Phillips, executive director of Sierra Club California. "The oil industry really managed to direct a lot of policy in subtle and not-so-subtle ways."

And the forest industry, she noted, pushed through last-minute legislation to allow harvesting of larger trees on private property with little state oversight.

In addition, all but one of the 38 bills the California Chamber of Commerce identified as "job killers" died. Those included measures that would have doubled fines issued by the Air Resources Board, made it easier for local governments to raise taxes and imposed extraction fees on oil companies.

"We are pleased with our success," said Denise Davis, a spokeswoman for the Chamber. "We fought hard and made sure legislators understood how bad these proposed job killers would have been for California jobs and our economy."

Assemblyman Jeff Gorell (R-Camarillo) said the concerns his party had about the Democratic supermajority never fully materialized, in part because Republicans found an unlikely ally on fiscal matters.

"Gov. Brown proved to be one of more conservative Democrats in the building," Gorell said.

He noted that the legislative year also was shaped by the influence of the unusually large freshman class, the influence of newly drawn districts and a "top-two" primary system that favored moderate candidates.

The new arrivals "showed a level of thoughtfulness you don't see in every freshman class. So that I think helped mute some of the more extreme ideas that were coming out of the far left and maybe even the far right," Gorell

said. "There are a number of Democrats who came from very conservative districts whose vote record reflected that."

Among them is Assemblyman Steve Fox (D-Palmdale), a freshman who beat his Republican challenger by just 145 votes. Fox's district leans conservative, making it a prime GOP target next year.

Fox said he made clear to his Democratic caucus that he could not be counted on to toe the party line.

"I told them, 'I'm going to vote my district,' and they accepted it," Fox said. "When it comes to 2nd Amendment rights, I vote with Republicans. When it comes to education, I'll be with Democrats.... If there's a tax, I do my best to vote against taxes."

Democratic moderates are likely to be even more risk-averse in 2014, said Allan Hoffenblum, a former GOP strategist and publisher of the nonpartisan California Target Book, which handicaps legislative races.

Hoffenblum said many of the moderate freshman squeaked out victories last year because of a large turnout of Democrats supporting President Obama's reelection. Turnout is expected to be much lower in 2014, and such conditions typically favor Republicans.

"If you're going to have any significant change in regards to Prop. 13 or guns, it would have had to be done this year," Hoffenblum said. "Big changes come right after the election, not before the next election."