

Independents see surge in past decade

by Mary Jo Pitzl - Feb. 6, 2011 12:00 AM
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Coming on the heels of an election with big victories, it's hard to believe that for decades, Arizona's voter rolls were dominated by Democrats.

But up into the 1970s, Democrats were the pre-eminent party, holding margins of 75 to 10 percent over Republicans.

That shifted in 1986, when Republicans pulled ahead. And late last month, independents edged Democrats to claim the spot of the second-biggest "party" in the state - behind Republicans - even though by definition, voters registered as "party not designated" are not a party.

The latest figures confirm a trend that has been building in Arizona and nationally, as independent voters continue to increase as a percentage of the voting population.

In Arizona, independent registration surged in the past decade, jumping from 18 percent in 2000 to 31.66 percent today.

What it means is that candidates are going to have to work harder not only to attract these voters but also to get them to turn out to vote, political consultants and political-science professors said.

Most political strategists agree that the way to win an independent's vote is to moderate, buffing off some of the harder edges of

Republican and Democratic positions, said Fred Solop, chairman of the Department of Politics and International Affairs at Northern Arizona University.

"I think Janet Napolitano wrote the book on that," he said. She's a Democrat who won three statewide races (one for attorney and two for governor) even as Democrats saw their numbers dropping.

"She had to pitch herself in a more centrist manner," Solop said. "She was strong on law and order."

The Democrat who fared the best in statewide races last November was Felecia Rotellini, who ran a competitive campaign for attorney general that was not decided until a week after Election Day. Observers attributed her relatively strong showing to her centrist message, although that was overpowered by the emotional appeal of Tom Horne's unwavering support for Senate Bill 1070, the state's immigration-enforcement law.

Turning out the vote

Not everyone agrees that the voter-registration trend is a sign of a race to the

middle.

After all, independent voters don't show up at the polls in numbers proportional to their surge in registration, said Nathan Sproul, managing partner with the Lincoln Strategy Group and former director of the Arizona Republican Party.

Turnout among independents last fall was about 15 to 20 percent, said Sproul, and that's pretty much what it was in 2000.

Jim Pederson, former chairman of the state Democratic Party, agrees. He said he'd rather see parties focus on the "lazy voter:" Someone who votes occasionally, perhaps only in presidential-election years.

There's a better chance of winning those voters than trying to entice people who register at rallies or during drives.

"You not only have to get that person to register to vote, you have to drag them to the polls," he said.

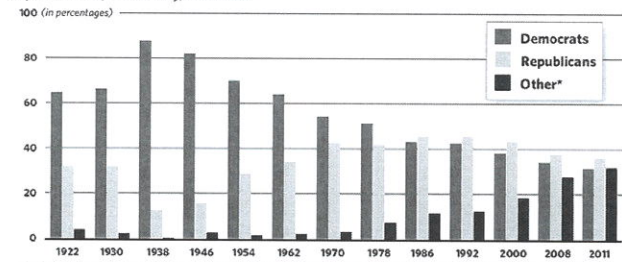
To Mario Diaz, who ran Napolitano's first gubernatorial campaign, as well as Sproul, the rise of independents signals the need for Republicans and Democrats to work harder to figure out how to attract enough independents to push their candidate into the winning column.

Sproul said the parties need to do a lot more research to tease out which themes will resonate with independent voters. Long gone is the day when parties could count on people voting a straight ticket, he said.

To both consultants, that means fundraising will become pre-eminent.

Voter-registration trends

The number of independent voters has risen dramatically in the last decade, drawing registration away from Republicans and, more notably, Democrats.



*Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. The "other" category includes recognized parties that have come and gone over the years. For 2011, the Libertarian Party constitutes 0.78 percent of voter registration; the Green Party is 0.16 percent. That leaves the current "independent" pool at 31.66 percent.

Source: Arizona Secretary of State

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