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Turnout may have doomed reforms

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger brought his reform campaign to the Inland Empire several times, but area Republicans didn't take his agenda with them to the polls.

Low turnout in San Bernardino County, where 42 percent of eligible voters are registered Republicans, and Riverside County, where 46 percent are registered Republicans, helped to doom the governor's prospects, said political observers and party officials.

An unofficial count showed that 36 percent of eligible voters in San Bernardino County and 37 percent of those in Riverside County cast ballots in the special election.

"I think the Inland Empire (has) enormous growth potential for Republicans. But like other parts of the state, they were hurt by an unnecessary and ineffective Republican campaign that drained the local Republicans of time and money," said Arnold Steinberg, a Los Angeles-based Republican political consultant.

Steinberg, an early critic of the special election, said Schwarzenegger's advisers failed the governor by squandering the bipartisan backing that swept him into office in 2003 and wrecked the chances for needed governmental reform.

San Bernardino County voters narrowly approved Proposition 75, which would have restricted use of public-employee union dues. But they rejected Proposition 74, changing teacher tenure; Proposition 76, a spending cap initiative; and Proposition 77, a redistricting initiative. They also supported Proposition 73, a parental-notification abortion initiative the governor also backed.

Mostly Democratic Los Angeles County rejected all of the initiatives. Riverside County voters backed Propositions 73, 74 and 75 and rejected 76 and 77.

"The first big mistake by the governor's advisers is that they let opponents air negative commercials for far too long without responding," said Kevin Jeffries, Riverside County Republican Party chairman. "(It was) a barrage that went unchecked, unanswered and unchallenged, so by the time the governor was out there, not only was he fighting for his initiatives, but he was fighting for his reputation."

San Bernardino County Republican Party Vice Chairman Paul Biane said the overall money advantage by Democrats and unions was a huge obstacle, but he also agreed with Jeffries on the missteps of the governor's campaign strategists.

"There was \$130 million spent against the governor, and the fact that it was still as close as it was shows people cared about these issues," said Biane, who represents the 2nd District on the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors. "But there has to be a better job done of educating the voters, not just one-liners in commercials."

Jeffries and Biane said Republican party officials in both counties will step back and review what needs to be done differently in the future. Both counties had large get-out-the-vote efforts, but they weren't as successful as they should have been, they said.

"I think the (loss) will have some effect with the Legislature," said Ralph Rossum, director of Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute, which focuses on state and local government. "The Democrats will feel emboldened and charge ahead and make life difficult for the governor."

But Rossum and others said they believe the governor and county Republican parties will refocus on their agendas, especially as Schwarzenegger's 2006 re-election campaign moves closer.

Jeffries, however, voiced some concern about the governor's next step. "My biggest fear is that the governor is going to walk away from Republican principles that put him in office and essentially capitulate on tax increases and the liberal agenda in Sacramento," he said. "I have no reason to believe he will, but it is my fear."

The rest of the initiatives - Propositions 78 and 79, dueling drug-discount initiatives, and Proposition 80, an energy regulation initiative - were rejected by voters in all three counties.

A CLOSER LOOK

Local Republican leaders say low voter turnout Tuesday may have contributed to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's reform agenda failing. Republican pluralities in San Bernardino and Riverside counties failed to back Propositions 74, 75, 76 and 77 as strongly as expected, while Los Angeles County, with its Democratic majority, completely rejected all four.

The unofficial count of voter turnout by the Secretary of State's Office is as follows:

- San Bernardino County - 36.2 percent
- Riverside County - 37 percent
- Los Angeles County - 41 percent
- California - 42.6 percent