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Western Democrats mull the secrets of their success

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By William L. Spence of the Tribune

Regional political leaders hear from analysts about party's strengths, potential growth

WORLEY, Idaho - Democrats have enjoyed extraordinary success the last few years, capturing strong majorities in both houses of Congress, together with the presidency, most state legislatures and most governorships.

Understanding why that happened - and how to maintain the trend - was the primary topic of conversation at the Democratic National Convention Western States Caucus convention here Saturday.

The convention, which ends today, brought together about 100 party officials from the 13 western states for three days of presentations and training. Saturday's meetings included sessions on how to communicate more effectively on ballot issues and political campaigns, as well as research on issues of importance to western voters.

Political analyst David Domke from the University of Washington noted that Democrats - besides capturing the presidency for just the fourth time in the last 11 elections - have picked up more than 50 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2004, together with 16 U.S. Senate seats. They've gone from 22 to 28 governorships and from 17 to 27 state legislatures in that same time period, he said.

Possible explanations for the turnaround, Domke said, include "the Bush factor" - the idea that "George Bush was so unpopular, he single-handedly helped the Democratic Party survive."

Population growth and increased participation by Latino or African American voters is another possibility, he said, together with the idea that the cultural issues that put Republicans in power - such as abortion or gay marriage - are no longer as important as they once were, given the recent state of the economy.

Finally, some suggest there is "an emerging global mindset (among voters) who want political leadership that's open to diplomacy and to other cultural groups," Domke said.

Jill Hanauer, president of Project New West, a Denver-based political polling and research firm, noted changing demographics explain some of the political shift in the intermountain West, where the number of Democratic congressmen has increased from five to 17 since 2000, out of 28 total seats.

People moving to the region often came for quality-of-life reasons, she said, such as open space and outdoor opportunities. The conservative Republican political leaders in place at the time were out of touch with the issues newcomers felt were important. That gave Democrats an opening, helping them capture traditional Republican strongholds - like the Colorado Legislature, where Democrats in 2004 won control of both the House and Senate for the first time since 1960.

"Simultaneous with that growth, a new breed of Democrat came along," Hanauer said. "They were pragmatic and non-ideological. They didn't put an ideological stamp on what it meant to be a Democrat. They made it safe for moderate Republicans and (independents) to take a look at Democratic candidates."

Those safe, new Democrats include people like Idaho Congressman Walt Minnick, who defeated Republican incumbent Bill Sali in 2008.

"People saw Sali making choices that they didn't think were the right choices," she said. "They trusted Minnick as a businessman and a conservationist. He seemed authentic. That was a common strain (in the success of western Democrats)."

Domke proposed another contributing factor the Democrats' recent success. He suggested there has been "a revolution in citizenship" - a fundamental change in what young people want in political leaders and in how they engage with the world.

For example, despite the myth of the "liberal young voter," he said, voters under the age of 30 didn't support Democratic presidential nominees in higher numbers than the overall voting population from 1980 to 2000.

In the last two elections, though, "there was massive divergence," Domke said. "In 2008, the only population among white voters who gave a majority for Obama were voters under the age of 30. They went 66 percent to 32 percent for McCain. That was four times larger than the pro-Kennedy gap in 1960.

"The shift in how young citizens think, engage and vote (today) is something fundamentally different than what we've seen the last 20 to 30 years."

Moreover, when states are ranked by median age, the West accounts for seven of the 10 youngest states in the nation. The oldest populations are in traditional Republican states in the South and East.

"Republicans are in trouble because they're a regional party and an older party," Domke said. "The future of the Democratic Party is in the West and in young voters."

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