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O.C. Democrats pay the price for lack of unity

A voter registration drive strengthened the party in the 1st Supervisorial District, but when its strong candidate backed out, there was no Plan B.

By Christian Berthelsen, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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At the start of the year, Democrats in Orange County thought they were on the verge of capturing a seat on the Board of Supervisors representing Santa Ana and the central county area.

They had a strong candidate in Joe Dunn, who had represented the region in the state Senate. A \$150,000 registration drive had added more than 7,000 voters to the Democratic edge in the 1st Supervisorial District

And they were facing a vulnerable Republican candidate, Janet Nguyen, who won the seat in a special election by just three votes, faced an ongoing legal attack from rivals and had a record of first-term missteps that included an illicit fundraising campaign and a pricey office renovation.

But on election day last week, it was Nguyen being feted at a victory party at the Azteca restaurant in Garden Grove. Dunn decided not to run in mid-January, and the eventual Democratic candidate, Hoa Van Tran, finished a distant third with 16% of the vote.

The returns came in Tuesday night, but party leaders, activists and commentators said in interviews that the race was effectively lost months ago.

The county's elected Democratic politicians were pitted against the party and labor machines over Dunn's candidacy. When he backed out, Democrats had no Plan B -- no bench of up-and-coming politicians to turn to, no cohesive organization in place that could readily get another candidate elected.

Then Tran's campaign disintegrated amid internal recriminations that included a restraining order obtained by a campaign worker who accused the campaign manager of trying to run her car off the road.

Orange County's Democrats have been trying to sort out what went wrong and what they can do to make the party more effective.

"From the beginning, the gulf that exists between the party, between labor and some of the electeds didn't send a message of unity in a philosophical and a practical sense," said Nick Berardino, the general manager of the Orange County Employees Assn. and a key figure in the labor movement that finances much of local Democratic politics. "This has all got to get fixed."

Democrats have gained a toehold in Orange County in the last dozen years, but the gains are hard-fought and hard-kept, and Republicans remain the dominant party. Though Democrats make up nearly a third of voters in Orange County, they hold just three of its 25 elected congressional, legislative and supervisorial seats -- all roughly overlapping the same patch of central county turf. Though the county board seats are nominally nonpartisan, both parties endorse and back candidates in the races.

The 1st District seat was briefly held by Democrat Lou Correa, but he left mid-term.

after his election to the state Senate. Nguyen was elected in the special election to fill the remainder of his term, defeating Democrat Tom Umberg.

Universally, Democrats said one of the party's chief failures has been that it does not do enough to recruit and cultivate talented politicians at the local level who are interested in, and capable of, running for higher office. The Orange County GOP, they note, has aggressively built a farm system of sorts, cultivating local elected officials in virtually every school board, city council and other local office throughout the county.

Democrats say their lack of a comparable program played a role in their loss in the 1st District in the last two elections and needs to change if the party is to be more effective.

"What Democrats need to do in the next four years is identify candidates, build a structure, build a base," said Chris Prevatt, a Democratic blogger and publisher of www.theiberaleoc.com.

"We have to do our homework," he said. "We didn't do that after Lou Correa left, and we put all our eggs in the basket of Tom Umberg. That didn't work. We had a year to recover, and we still didn't do it. The only people Democrats have to blame are themselves."

Labor and party leaders say they didn't have an alternative candidate because they had no reason to think Dunn would back out. When he did, there were no other good options, they said.

Then there was the dispute between the elected officials and the political machine. Even though the party and unions supported Dunn and polls showed he had a strong chance of beating Nguyen, U.S. Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Garden Grove), Correa and state Assemblyman Jose Solorio (D-Santa Ana) let it be known that they would not support Dunn's candidacy. In interviews, Correa and Solorio said that Dunn, when a senator, had not always acted in the best interests of the district. Sanchez said last week she would have supported Dunn if the others had.

Through a spokesman for the California Medical Assn., where he is chief executive, Dunn declined a request for an interview.

The failure to field a strong candidate squandered an aggressive -- and expensive -- voter registration drive. With the backing of labor, the party registered about 38,000 new Democrats throughout the county in the last 16 months, far outstripping Republican efforts. Party leaders said they were encouraged by the growing registration numbers, and noted that the party had begun grooming local-level candidates who, although not ready to step into the void of the 1st District race this time, will be ready in the future. And they said they were encouraged that discussions are beginning on how to build a better structure.

Now, party groups and labor are talking about coordinating their efforts in ways they never have before, with the chief goal of putting more effort into developing candidates and agreeing on whom they will back for certain races.

"What happened in these last elections was the Democratic Party did one thing, labor did another thing, the Young Democrats did their own thing -- and that was a shame, because we have been so successful in voter registration that we did not have the structure in place to capitalize by having a viable candidate," Bernardino said. "The structure has to be in place and managed in a strongly disciplined fashion or we're not going to put wins on the scoreboard. It's just that simple."

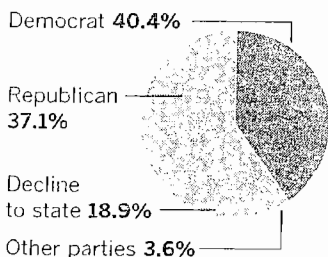
christian berthelsen

Opportunity missed

Most of the voters in Orange County's 1st Supervisorial District are Democrats, but they have failed to capture the board seat two elections in a row. Republican Janet Nguyen won Tuesday with about 56% of the vote.

Registered voters in the 1st Supervisorial district

As of May 31



Source: Orange County registrar of voters

