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# Traditional Valleycrats die off

## Moderates losing out amid increasing political partisanship.

By John Ellis and Michael Doyle

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The Valleycrat is an endangered species.

A storied Central Valley political hybrid, the moderate-to-conservative Valleycrat stressed regional loyalty first and foremost. Party labels were secondary. Bipartisan cooperation was commonplace, particularly on farm and water issues. Cross-party personal relationships were warm or at least respectful.

Now? Not so much.

"That's gone from both parties; there's no question about it," said former San Joaquin Valley congressman John Krebs, a Democrat. "Now, the well is so poisoned."

The cost of division, experts agree, could be significant. The Valley's delegation needs cohesion because it is dwarfed by larger interests from Los Angeles and the Bay Area. Rancor and distrust weaken the region's power. "If our people don't work together, our voice is just diluted that much more," said Joel Nelsen, president of the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual.

Nonetheless, in the past decade, relations have frayed and partisanship has increased. It often seems that Republican Rep. Devin Nunes of Visalia and Democratic Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno can barely disguise their mutual loathing. Breaking a live-and-let-live tradition, Valley lawmakers are explicitly trying to unseat their colleagues.

In Sacramento, some Valley legislators face attack from members of their own party if they don't toe the partisan line. In Washington, House Republicans have been writing a California water bill for the past year without letting Democrats into the room.

"For three decades or longer, Valley Democrats and Republicans worked together. We had far more in common than what differences we had," Costa said. "All that has changed in the last couple of years."

Not everyone agrees that relationships have fallen apart.

Freshman Rep. Jeff Denham, who recently moved his residence from Atwater to Turlock, insisted relations among Valley lawmakers are "good and getting better," and noted as an example that he is meeting with Costa this week.

Nunes said that while he thinks the idea of a moderate Valleycrat "is gone," he said that "where we can work together, we work together."

### Tempered politicians

Political analyst Tony Quinn, a former Republican legislative staffer, and Fresno Republican and former Secretary of State Bill Jones both trace the demise of the Valleycrat in part to the congressional and legislative districts that were drawn after the 1980 census.

It was partisan gerrymandering that ushered in a decade of Democratic Party dominance in California. In the process, it politically segregated parts of the Valley along racial lines, Quinn said.

Before that time, for instance, it was common to have a heavily Hispanic part of Fresno in a district with an affluent white area such as Old Fig Garden. That moderated politics and tempered politicians of both parties.

A one-time Fresno County supervisor, Krebs served in the House of Representatives between 1975 and 1979. It seemed a golden era for Valleycrats.

Texas native-turned-San Joaquin Valley resident Bernie Sisk, a fellow House Democrat, was tending to the region's farmers with the help of conservative Southern allies.

From Roseville, in the Sacramento Valley, business-friendly Democrat Harold “Bizz” Johnson was pushing roads and dams with GOP help.

Both were out of Congress by 1981.

In 1970, the late Republican Ken Maddy won 57% of the vote in an Assembly seat that had just 31% registered as Republicans. He went on to represent the region for nearly three decades before term limits forced him out of office in 1998.

When Maddy died of cancer in 2000, then-Assembly Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles called him “the prototype of the legislator who works across the aisle to get things done.”

By that time, however, another controversial reapportionment was coming. Jones called the 2001 redistricting plan an “unholy alliance between Republicans and Democrats” that gave incumbents of both parties highly partisan districts — and safe seats.

With these districts locked into place for another decade, politicians found little reason to work with members of the other party.

Term limits for state Assembly and Senate hastened turnover, and those seeking office played to the party-fringe voters that dominate primary elections because that was the only election they had to worry about.

“The effect of it is you get essentially fairly conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats,” Quinn said. “You don’t get the Valleycrats.”

Losing the middle

Demographic shifts also played a role.

Sixty years ago, the Valley was ruled by New Deal Democrats. But as Republicans moved inland, the tide began to change. Quinn remembers when Placer and El Dorado were “labor union counties.” Now, he said, they are “Orange County north.” Parts of Fresno and Clovis have seen similar changes.

“Ken Maddy couldn’t get elected today,” said Richard Lehman, a former Democratic congressman from the Valley who is now a Sacramento-based lobbyist. “I doubt Bernie [Sisk] could get elected in [his] district today, as moderate as he was.”

The final straw was the hardening of political positions by the major parties, both in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

Both the Republican and Democratic parties have been losing their middle. That decline was epitomized in the 2010 House elections, when 24 Democratic members of the centrist Blue Dog coalition lost their seats.

In Sacramento, four now-departed Valley legislators — Assembly Democrats Juan Arambula of Fresno and Nicole Parra of Hanford, and Republicans Mike Villines of Clovis and state Sen. Dave Cogdill of Modesto — all paid heavy political prices for seeking support on bipartisan Valley issues or for forging compromise on other matters.

Cogdill was ousted as the state Senate’s Republican leader the same night as a vote on a budget he helped negotiate that temporarily raised taxes.

Lehman noted that Maddy took a similar political route several times — fighting hard for what he wanted in the budget, but in the end seeking compromise and the best he could hope for in the spending plan — and was never pilloried for it.

“If you try to be a Valleycrat in either party you will be punished,” Quinn said.

It wasn’t always that way.

Nelsen, the Citrus Mutual president, remembers the 1980s when Valley legislators joined together to push new pesticide laws that required farmers to give the state details on all chemicals used on each of their fields.

As part of the bill package, the agriculture industry agreed to foot the bill for the program.

A few years later, Nelsen recalled, local legislators came together to fight off efforts by environmentalists to increase the levy that paid for the program.



"You definitely had that spirit of unity, and it doesn't exist now," Nelsen said.

That loss of cooperation and camaraderie — along with the changeover of many of the Valley's elected officials, both Republican and Democrat — has resulted in the demise of the Valleycrat. It didn't happen overnight, but there is broad agreement that it has happened.

Said Quinn, the political analyst: "It's been a long, slow death on both sides."

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Ken Maddy