

[← Back to Original Article](#)

O.C.'s Hurtt to Lead GOP in State Senate

August 25, 1995 | CARL INGRAM | TIMES STAFF WRITER

SACRAMENTO — In a surprise strike, state Senate Republicans threw out moderate veteran Ken Maddy as their longtime minority leader Thursday and replaced him with a wealthy, first-term conservative from Orange County hard-bent on the GOP taking control of the Senate.

The upheaval in the usually serene Senate installed ambitious Sen. Rob Hurtt of Garden Grove and signaled an apparent sharp shift toward the political right by the GOP caucus.

Hurtt's ascent means that three of the top legislative posts in the state capital are now occupied by Republican lawmakers who live within 15 minutes of one another in Orange County--two of them in Garden Grove.

On Monday, Assemblyman Curt Pringle, also of Garden Grove, was elected Assembly GOP leader. In June, Assembly Democrats helped propel Doris Allen (R-Cypress) to the speakership, prompting howls of protest from Republicans and a looming recall attempt.

The county now has an unprecedented link to the Legislature's power base, giving it considerable clout as it tries to recover from \$1.7 billion in investment losses that prompted it to declare bankruptcy last year.

Long a bastion for conservative Republicans, Orange County has rarely had elected leaders in positions of power in Sacramento. But the election of Hurtt and Pringle in the same week underscores Orange County's growing influence as the Legislature increasingly tilts to the right.

As a first priority, Hurtt announced, he will aggressively chart a course to elect enough Republicans to eventually wrest control from Democrats, who have controlled the Senate for more than two decades.

"I've got the most experience in that area, so we will be concentrating on elections," said Hurtt, who is closely identified with the political right and is a major contributor to conservative legislative candidates.

The ouster of Maddy, 62, a close political ally and friend of Gov. Pete Wilson and a pragmatic consensus builder who led Senate Republicans for eight years, marked the second time in four days that restive conservatives overcame moderates to win the top leadership post of their caucuses. On Monday, Curt Pringle--like Hurtt, from Garden Grove in Orange County--was chosen Assembly GOP leader.

Senate President Pro Tem Bill Lockyer (D-Hayward), who at fund-raising events has called Hurtt a poster boy of the religious right, deplored Hurtt's promotion. He said Hurtt is "anti-choice, anti-minority, anti-labor and homophobic."

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Informed of Lockyer's characterization, Hurtt told reporters, "I think those are just conservative values."

He said he had never been a member of conservative religious organizations led by Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson and challenged Lockyer to find something in his legislative record that served the religious right.

"As far as I'm concerned, those are false allegations," Hurtt snapped.

Hurtt is a wealthy container manufacturer in Orange County who, together with a small group of Southern California business associates, has contributed more than \$4 million to conservative legislative candidates in the past four years.

Last year, Hurtt and his various political committees were the biggest donors to California legislative campaigns, topping out at \$2.3 million, according to Democratic campaign sources.

Maddy told reporters that it would be a mistake for Hurtt to focus in the months ahead on exclusively supporting New Right candidates. "I would hope that all of the members of the so-called Christian right will recognize that you can't just elect one type of individual in the Republican Party to office," Maddy said.

"The districts do not allow that."

Although Hurtt launched a one-man challenge against Maddy shortly after he was elected to the Senate three years ago, the coup Thursday was swift and caught Maddy and his supporters off guard.

Convening behind closed doors for their regular Thursday breakfast of coffee and pastry, nine of the Senate's 17 Republicans voted for Hurtt, sources said. Seven sided with Maddy and another abstained.

Sources said Hurtt's support came chiefly from former Assembly members and other Senate newcomers whom he had helped elect.

"There was some sense that Rob Hurtt, with fresh ideas and new blood, might do a better job," said Sen. Bill Leonard of San Bernardino, the GOP caucus chairman.

Maddy told reporters he was surprised at his ouster and "disappointed" that one or two of his supporters had defected to Hurtt without telling him. "This is a game of wins and losses. I'm in the [horse] race business, and I'm a lawyer. Part of your life is you win and lose," he said.

Wilson was out of town, but Hurtt, who has endorsed Texas Sen. Phil Gramm for President, telephoned Kevin Sloat, the governor's legislative secretary, and told him that he was eager to meet formally with Wilson.

In an interview later, Sloat praised Maddy as a "very good friend and a very effective leader." He carefully added, "I think we are going to be able to establish a strong working relationship with Sen. Hurtt. I think we are going to find a lot more to agree on than disagree on."

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During his three years in the Senate, Hurtt, an affable man, has focused more on politics than legislation, carrying few major bills. He seldom makes floor speeches, but has irked fellow Republicans on occasion by laughing out loud and pointing out when they have voted for Democratic legislation.

As Republican leader, he told reporters that he sees himself as a "manager" of the Republican agenda. He said he favors reform of the civil litigation system and further changes in workers' compensation insurance.

In next year's elections, 20 of the 40 Senate seats are at stake. Democrats now outnumber Republicans 21 to 17. There are two independents, who usually side with Democrats on partisan issues.

Campaign strategists on both sides have pinpointed seven key races that could go either way, including the campaigns to replace retiring Sens. Daniel Boatwright (D-Concord) and Lucy Killea (I-San Diego).

Hurtt said he hopes that the GOP will gain at least two seats in 1996, bringing its total to 19, but still two short of the majority required to control. "I think it is going to be very difficult for us," he said, "to pick up two seats."

* PROFILE: New minority leader is no ordinary freshman senator. A17

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX / INFOGRAPHIC)

Profile: Rob Hurtt

Affiliation: Republican

Represents: 32nd state Senate District, Garden Grove

Age: 51

Family: Married, four children

Education: Bachelor's degree in economics, Claremont McKenna College

Other interest: Owns a Garden Grove container manufacturing firm

First elected: March, 1993, to seat vacated when state Sen. Ed Royce was elected to Congress

Senate activity: Established Allied Business PAC with four other businessmen before 1992 elections. Together they have put more than \$3.6 million toward candidates and causes; founded Capitol Resource Institute, Sacramento-based lobbying and educational group focused on conservative family issues, in late 1980s

Source: Rob Hurtt