

Calif. Democrats May Compromise on Quotas

Besieged Party Reluctant to Fight Initiative Against Affirmative Action

By William Claiborne
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LOS ANGELES, Feb. 3—California's top Democrats are looking for ways to accommodate a proposed ballot initiative in 1996 that would repeal all state laws on affirmative action, a cornerstone of the party's social policies for three decades.

Mindful of the electoral hammering they suffered last November, the Democrats say it would be political suicide not to compromise in the face of increasingly popular Republican attacks on affirmative action as "reverse discrimination" against whites and males.

Above all, party leaders are seek-

ing to avoid a repeat of last fall when voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 187, which would deny many social services to illegal immigrants. Many Democrats who opposed the initiative, which is now bottlenecked in court appeals, went down to defeat, including gubernatorial candidate Kathleen Brown.

"This could become Armageddon. It's potentially worse than Proposition 187, much more divisive, really. It will turn neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother," said state Democratic chairman Bill Press.

Affirmative action is one of a number of cutting-edge national issues—such as crime control, welfare re-

form and devolution of power to the states—that Democratic strategists here argue the party must reconsider. Some contend the party cannot afford to cling to outmoded positions or to relinquish to Republicans the support of white middle- and working-class voters who lean rightward on these issues.

Sponsored by two conservative San Francisco-area scholars, the proposed California Civil Rights Initiative would amend the state constitution to prohibit state and local governments from giving preference to women and minorities in jobs, promotions, contracts and college admissions. It has been endorsed by
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the state Republican Party and its backers predict they will easily get the 615,000 valid signatures needed to qualify for the 1996 ballot.

But Press said state Democrats do not want to stage an ideological showdown over the issue. "Not only is this an area where there's a possibility of compromise, we have to be aggressive in seeking a compromise in order to avoid a bloodbath in 1996," he said.

"I say that as a longtime supporter of affirmative action. But like a lot of good programs, it can be abused by people with the best intentions. There are cases where people can point to where it's been discriminatory. If it's broke, I think we've got to fix it," Press added.

Lt. Gov. Gray Davis, who since being elected in November has emerged as the

Democratic Party's policy point man, told reporters at a breakfast meeting this week, "There shouldn't be any sacred cows in public policy and all of us should have the courage to reexamine policies, no matter how noble, to make sure they're still wanted."

In a later interview, Davis added that Democrats have to assume the initiative will be on the ballot in 1996 and will be popular, and that they should "take stock of the beating we got last time and collectively search for a message that resonates with the voters but is still accepted by our supporters."

Noting that California is "more conservative than people appreciate," Davis, a one-time aide to former governor Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown Jr. (D), said Republicans have been adept at promoting "wedge" issues in ballot initiatives that have spilled over into electoral defeats for Democrats—including

Proposition 187 last year, welfare reform in 1992 and term limits in 1990.

Press said that although the party leadership will hold a series of meetings to devise an affirmative action strategy, one possibility is a counter ballot initiative that would allow remedies to discrimination based more on "socioeconomic considerations" than race, ethnicity and gender. Such a policy would be consistent with the way academic scholarships traditionally have been granted, he said.

Press said he would prefer to revise affirmative action in the state legislature, but, "If it has to go to the ballot . . . we'll have our own ballot initiative." He said the party would favor a vote on the proposition in the March presidential primary, when the two parties would not be going head-to-head.

Gov. Pete Wilson (R) has not yet taken a position on the ballot initiative, according to

spokeswoman Leslie Goodman. But in a recent television panel interview show, Wilson said, "I don't think we should be awarding either jobs or places in a graduate school class based upon race or gender, because if you do, essentially you're talking about a quota system, and I don't think that what we want are quotas. We don't want to deny anybody access, but I don't think you give preferences by virtue of gender or membership in an ethnic group."

Because California is a bellwether of political and social change nationally, backers of the movement against affirmative action say the ballot initiative could have wide repercussions.

"I'm not surprised Gray Davis made that move. I think it will split the Democratic Party and you're going to see plenty of people jumping on the bandwagon all across the country," said David Horowitz, president of

the conservative, Los Angeles-based Center for the Study of Popular Culture. "People are no longer intimidated by the charge of racism, because it's been so overused and trivialized."

Horowitz, a onetime New Left radical who coauthored "Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the 1960s," said that in the wake of the Republican revolution in November, "the dam has burst" in public attitudes against existing affirmative action laws.

William L. Taylor, vice chairman of the Washington-based Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, who supports affirmative action, said he was not surprised at the Democrats' steps to accommodate the repeal movement. "After November, there are people in various stages of shell shock. Politicians are concerned about what kind of hit they'll take on this one," said Taylor.

WASH. POST

2-4-95