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Republicans Ponder the Center

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

Published: October 11, 2003

AN JOSE, Calif., Oct. 10 — In Arnold Schwarzenegger, the national Republican Party now has a magnetic movie star in charge of the most populous state in the union, a governor-elect who has already emerged as an articulate, media-savvy and earnest figure who does not play by the conventional rules of politics.

But far from simply rejoicing over his election, the party finds itself entangled in a debate over whether it should follow Mr. Schwarzenegger's path by moving to the center on social issues in order to become even more competitive in state and national races.

Mr. Schwarzenegger's sweeping victory stirred anxiety among some conservatives, as much as it has cheered moderate Republicans, who have seized on it as evidence of how the party should position itself to fortify its standing, even at a time when it has proved increasingly dominant in American politics.

Several moderate Republicans said Mr. Schwarzenegger was now in a position to be a hugely influential and moderating force on his party, should he choose to be.

"How he won tells me that his message — he's both fiscally conservative and socially inclusive and moderate — was one that appeals to the middle," said Christie Whitman, a moderate Republican and former New Jersey governor who recently stepped down as head of the Environmental Protection Agency.



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