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Editorial: Levine's stunning Assembly win a rejection by local voters of power politics

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SACRAMENTO Democrats have long had a difficult time figuring out Marin voters. We may be dependably liberal, but we don't do the bidding of party bosses.

Some Democratic Party-favored candidates, even ones flush with the state party's financial backing, have had trouble winning over Marin voters who resist — with their votes — being politically force-fed or if they feel a candidate is trying to buy victory.

That message was sent again Tuesday night as San Rafael Councilman Marc Levine appears to have won a David-vs.-Goliath battle for our seat in the Assembly.

David has triumphed before in Marin.

Often, that success has depended on Goliath hitting himself in the head with a flawed strategy.

This time, state and local party leaders lined up to support Assemblyman Michael Allen, a veteran North Bay politician who had lost his district to reapportionment and moved to Marin to run for the seat vacated by Jared Huffman, who was forced out by term limits. Allen has more experience and a deeper resume than Levine. He also has the backing of Speaker John Perez, who asked local Democrats to stay out of the race.

The prospect of a costly campaign and defying Perez caused most Democrats to flinch and clear the field for Allen.

Not Levine. He defied the speaker and stayed in the race. He also had what Allen failed to establish: Real Marin roots.

No matter how much Allen spent — and he and his backers spent millions — he apparently couldn't convince voters that he was a local guy who would represent local interests.

In rejecting Allen, voters, including nearly half of those in Sonoma County, also bluntly informed Sacramento's Democratic power structure they didn't like being told who should represent them in the Assembly. Many voters clearly were appalled by all the money and mud that was poured into the race on Allen's behalf.

Allen's mailers, many of them negative, sent a clear message: The state Democratic Party was trying to buy an Assembly seat for a member of its leadership.

Levine ran on that message. He ran against top-down politics and it resonated with local Republicans, with independent voters and with enough local Democrats.

Voters' rejection of the heavy-handed strategy is a message that campaign consultants might want to consider in the future.

They probably won't, because it works too often.

Levine also got financial help from out-of-town political action committees, but nothing compared to what Allen got.

Levine proved to be a model candidate for the state's "top two" campaign reform, which voters approved in 2010. To win, he had to reach out to Democrats, independent voters and Republicans.

That's a good thing. After all, if his narrow lead holds up after the remaining tens of thousands of votes are counted, he will represent them as well.

Unfortunately, too many politicians forget their loyalty should be to the people, not political parties.

That's why voters approved the 2010 reform and why Levine likely will be Marin's new representative in the Assembly.