

[George Skelton](#): Capitol Journal

Nice guy will finish first as state Senate leader

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SACRAMENTO — There'll soon be a new face of the Legislature: a nice-guy face, the look of a wholesome policy wonk, the image of anything but a backroom boss.

This couldn't come at a more opportune time for the disrespected institution -- its stature scraping the bottom of polls, voters having just rejected its desired term limits change in a slap at legislative leadership.

Sen. Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) won't take over as Senate president pro tem until after the current legislative session ends around Labor Day. But he'll increasingly be in the public eye, I expect, starting to polish the Capitol's image.

In the Assembly, eight potential speakers have officially begun jockeying for votes in a leadership election to be held by Democrats on March 11.

Current Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez (D-Los Angeles) and Senate leader Don Perata (D-Oakland) became descending lame ducks as soon as the votes were counted on their failed term limits lifeline, Proposition 93.

The consensus around the Capitol is that change will be good.

Perata and Nuñez can be effective leaders. Passage of the much-needed 2006 infrastructure bonds is the best example. But the two haven't been getting along recently. Nuñez has been rocked by questionable spending of campaign funds. Perata has been under the dark cloud of an FBI investigation into possible corruption. And both got hammered by the nasty anti-93 campaign.

Steinberg, 48, may be exactly what the Legislature needs: a leader without hubris, with a dash of humility. Smiling, smart and substantive. Squeaky clean, by all appearances.

The rap on him is that he may be too nice. Too soft. Not at all cutthroat.

"It'll be interesting to watch," says Riverside County Dist. Atty. Rod Pacheco, the Assembly Republican leader when Steinberg was an influential Assembly

committee chairman. "That's kind of a rough-and-tumble place up there.

"He never stabbed me in the back. I never saw him stab anybody else in the back. I never saw the kindergarten gamesmanship from him that goes on up there constantly. . . .

"He's an exceptionally nice guy."

Over breakfast at a Capitol hangout, I asked Steinberg whether he was tough enough to discipline troublesome senators.

"Damn right," he said. "I'm willing to do what I need to do. . . .

"People make a mistake equating being nice with lack of steel. . . . You can be firm and resolute, but do it with a smile on your face."

The Capitol last week witnessed Steinberg's steel.

He captured one of the most powerful positions in California government without throwing a low blow. And, in the end, virtually everybody was left smiling.

Steinberg, an attorney and a former Sacramento city councilman, began angling for the leadership soon after being elected to the Senate in 2006. He quietly, but openly, lined up votes all last year.

"If you want something, you've got to go for it," Steinberg said. "Timing is everything in politics."

Perata was going to be out at the end of 2008 unless term limits were changed. Playing the loyal soldier, Steinberg committed \$150,000 of his campaign money to the pro-93 cause. "I may have been a little conflicted," he admitted, smiling.

At 7 o'clock on the morning after Prop. 93 was rejected, Steinberg e-mailed Perata requesting a meeting. They met at noon in the pro tem's office. This wasn't a coup, Steinberg assured the leader. Perata could set his own timetable for departure.

But Steinberg had 18 Democratic votes to succeed him and needed only 13, a majority of the caucus' 25 members. His opponent, freshman Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Pacoima), a former Los Angeles city councilman, probably had only two or three votes. Steinberg wanted to guarantee his victory.

"I've been around long enough to know that you can't let the grass grow underneath you," Steinberg told me.

"My buzz word was 'clarity.' I wanted clarity."

Most Democrats also wanted to avoid a distracting, bitter leadership fight like Perata went through when he was elected, and John Burton (D-San Francisco) before that.

Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica) pushed in a caucus meeting for a quick resolution. Perata feared becoming an ineffective lame duck, so a compromise was reached: There wouldn't be an official vote, only anointment by acclamation. The caucus vote would be in summer. Meanwhile, Steinberg would repeatedly proclaim: "There can be only one pro tem at a time."

Kuehl says she strongly supports Steinberg because: "He has good judgment. He has an ability to work with virtually everyone. He never gets ruffled. He's never mean. He's a progressive and I trust him."

Says Pacheco: "He's liberal. But he's an honest liberal."

While Steinberg was plotting to become pro tem, he also was plotting -- as he always has -- to enact significant public policy. He's a rare politician who opens up most conversations by pitching a policy proposal.

Probably his biggest achievement was passage of Proposition 63 in 2004 that taxes million-dollar incomes to raise \$1 billion annually for community mental health programs.

His priorities as leader? "We have to find a way to get our budget house in order. . . .

"We're having the wrong debate in California. It's been spending versus revenue. That leads nowhere, just Band-Aid solutions. We need a debate about what do we want and how are we going to pay for it."

That sounds liberal, but he added a conservative thought: "I don't think Democrats have focused nearly enough attention on outcome-based government." I.e., pay for only what works.

"This place needs a little bit of a different tone," he continued, referring to the Capitol. "Like people saying, 'We don't have a revenue problem, we have a spending problem.' That's just a cliché.

"If I ever resort to cliches, call me on it."

That would be a waste of ink. Capitol faces may change, but not the cliches.