

California GOP Stakes Out Position on Poverty

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SACRAMENTO, Calif.—In making their case for California’s policies on climate and immigration, Democrats proudly note the state’s status as one of the world’s most powerful economies, driven by thriving tech and creative industries.

Republicans here are pointing to a different metric: the poverty rate.

“Poverty is the No. 1 issue for California... We have to work to fix it,” said Republican state Assembly leader Chad Mayes. “It is directly related to the policies we have put in place in California.”

By focusing on poverty, Republicans here are making a bid for relevance in an overwhelmingly Democratic state in open rebellion against the White House and national Republicans.

One of Mr. Mayes’ first acts last year as Republican state Assembly leader was to bring his caucus to a local homeless shelter. This year, his members have introduced a series of bills aimed at the poor and middle class that are working their way through the legislative process.

While some of those bills are co-authored with Democrats, and Republicans say they expect bipartisan support, the GOP has also gone on offense, rolling out a social media campaign attacking Democrats on housing affordability, transportation costs, inequality and poverty.

Democrats say the GOP has been absent on votes that raised the state’s minimum wage and that expanded eligibility for welfare recipients. But they point to Republican support for the Earned-income tax credit, which supplements the federal tax credit and aids low-income workers.

That “does hold out hope that their interest is more than tweet-deep,” Democratic Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon said. The state GOP’s new focus on poverty could lead to more bipartisan efforts on housing affordability and college costs, he said.

The U.S. Census Bureau’s Supplemental Poverty Measure, which is adjusted for the cost of housing, places California second among the 50 states and Washington, D.C., with a poverty rate of 20.6%, just under the District of Columbia’s 22.2%.

The state ranks sixth in the world for gross domestic product, according to a report released last year by the California’s Department of Finance, but the state’s high cost of living is a drag on its economic power, according to another state analysis.

“We have the highest poverty rate in the nation, and that is on their watch,” Republican Party Chairman Jim Brulte said of the Democrats.

The 39-year-old Mr. Mayes, son of a small-town, evangelical pastor, sees opportunity in a “Jack Kemp-style, Republican” economic message. Republicans have pounced on the poverty measure as well as a means of criticizing California’s liberal establishment.

Sen. Holly J. Mitchell, a Los Angeles Democrat who chairs the state Senate budget committee, said the poverty-focus was a new tune for Republicans.

“You want to talk about poverty reduction or elimination, I am first in line, but I need for it to be a real conversation, not a campaign ploy,” Ms. Mitchell said.

California had the 17th-highest poverty rate among states, 15%, under the official Census measure. Poverty varies widely across the state, with some of the highest rates in the state’s inland, agricultural counties. The supplemental rate isn’t broken down at the county level but the official poverty rate is, so it captures some of the disparities in the Golden State.

Central California's Tulare County, with a poverty rate of 28.1%, and Fresno, to the north, with a rate of 26.8%, have the highest rates in the state. Many of the Republicans pushing the antipoverty agenda hail from inland areas.

The sparsely populated Mono County, on the Nevada border, has the lowest rate, at 4.9%, followed by two Bay Area counties: San Mateo, at 8%, and Marin, at 8.3%, according to U.S. Census data.

Jessica Bartholow, a policy advocate for the Western Center on Law and Poverty, said she had worked with Mr. Mayes on a bill he had introduced that would incentivize welfare recipients to get high-school and college degrees. She also applauded a Republican bill aimed at expanding the number of dentists that accept payment through Medi-Cal, the state's Medicaid program.

Nationally, House Speaker Paul Ryan has criticized anti-poverty spending as ineffective, and last year rolled out a series of proposals that included work requirements for welfare, greater state control over poverty programs and increasing job training programs. Critics said the plan cuts the social safety net.

The California GOP's focus comes after a nationalist message appealing to white, working class voters in key swing states proved a successful road to the White House for President Donald Trump.

Mr. Trump presents a conundrum for the state GOP, as his presidency has emboldened activists who have pushed the state party to embrace some of his more hard-line positions, which can be toxic in this liberal state.

The Republican Party's share of the voter registration is about 26% statewide, and Democrats expanded their majorities in both houses of the state legislature to supermajority status, meaning they can fast-track legislation and raise taxes without a single Republican vote.

Eric Schmidt of Hesperia, Calif., a San Bernardino County Republican Party central committee member and the president of aerospace company, Exquadrum Inc.—in an industry that has been in sharp decline here—agreed with the GOP's antipoverty focus. Poverty isn't a partisan issue, he said, it is "common sense."

"When you really look at the better part of 30 years of policies—they are not working," he said. "At some point you need to recognize that the decisions that are being made are not moving the general populace in the right direction."

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