
KAREN BASS: Coalition Builder

The first African-American female speaker in the nation has taken the reins in California.

BY DANIEL WEINTRAUB

When Karen Bass came to California's Capitol in 1993 to be honored as one of 120 "women of the year," she was not impressed with what she saw. Then a community organizer in Los Angeles, Bass sat in on a committee and watched in horror as the chain-smoking chairman of the panel treated the public with disdain.

"I was appalled," Bass says. "At the end of the day I said, 'I would never do this. This was awful.'"

Eleven years later Bass was elected to the Assembly, her first elective office. And in May, she took over as Assembly speaker, the first female Democrat to hold the post in California and the first African-American woman to serve as speaker anywhere in America.

Bass will be working with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger as he struggles to end California's perpetual budget deficits. She will also try to initiate a conversation about comprehensive tax reform in the

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Golden State, and probably, if she has her way, a tax increase. And she will work to provide hundreds of millions of dollars annually in additional funding for her top policy priority—foster care. She might even resort to a ballot measure to try to get that done.

That's an ambitious agenda for a legislative leader who already knows she will serve at most about three years in the job—she is termed out of office at the end of 2010. But Bass, 54, is not lacking in confidence. She believes she has the skills and the temperament to make progress in Sacramento despite

the ugly fiscal situation and a polarized political climate.

"This is a heck of a year to become speaker," she says, sitting in her ornately restored office in the Capitol's historic wing. "In the best of all worlds, it would be wonderful to be speaker back in the days when we had tons of money and could build colleges and roads and do all of that. But I am very motivated in a crisis. I'm motivated to step up. I'm motivated to attempt to build the type of coalitions that I've been building pretty much all my life. If ever there was a place that needed a coalition, it is this place."

A PROBLEM SOLVER

Bass does not underestimate the challenge she faces in drawing together the competing interests in Sacramento.

"We need to build a coalition—in the Democratic Caucus," she says, smiling. Then, turning more serious, she adds: "You need to build one with the Republicans. You need to build one with the Senate. Part of what I have spent my life doing is bringing people together and solving problems. I am very pragmatic and focused on outcomes.

"I don't like grandstanding. I like getting

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something done. And I can be focused to do that.”

As speaker, Bass succeeds Fabian Núñez, who leaves after four years in the job. She served as Núñez’s majority leader and was able to get a glimpse of leadership up close. Núñez carried California’s landmark bill to regulate greenhouse gases, negotiating the final details with Schwarzenegger.

He also helped put together a massive package of infrastructure bonds in 2006, won passage of an increase in the state’s minimum wage, and helped broker a bill to create prescription drug discounts for the working poor and middle-income people. Bass’ agenda, while perhaps more limited, will be no less difficult to achieve in troubled times. She already has begun by

appointing one of her chief rivals, Assemblyman Alberto Torrico, as majority floor leader.

AN EARLY START

If coalition building appears to come easy for Bass, it might be because she has been doing it most of her life. The daughter of a mail carrier, Bass grew up in a middle-class section of west Los Angeles and developed a love for organizing at a young age. At 14, she signed her mother up to be a precinct captain for Robert F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign and then took the job for herself.

“When Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated it was devastating in my life,” she says.

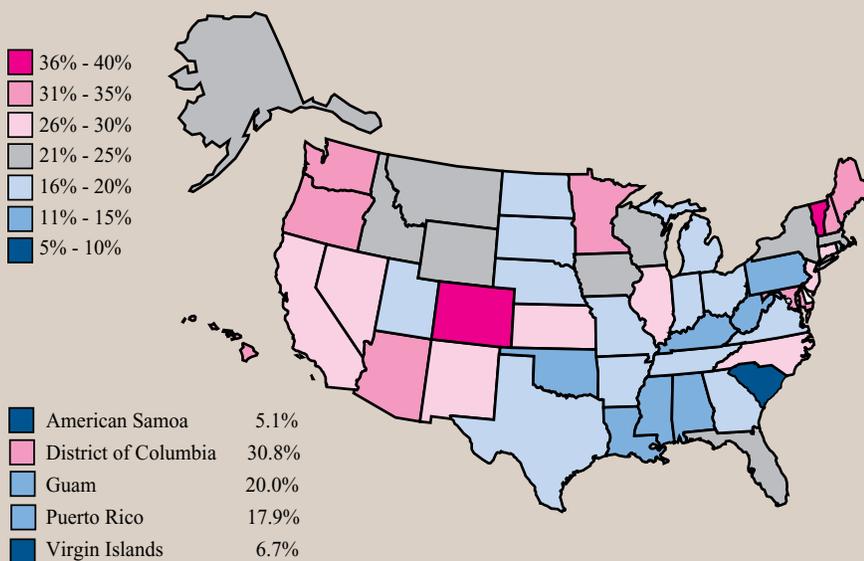
In college, she joined the anti-war move-

ment and, after going to work as a licensed vocational nurse, continued her political activism on the side. She began her rise to prominence when, in her words, she became “obsessed” with the crack cocaine epidemic, which hit inner-city black communities especially hard. She formed the Community Coalition in the late 1980s and got early funding from the first Bush administration.

“I wanted to see if I could shift the policy agenda away from law enforcement toward a public health and economic response,” she says. “I thought it was a health and economic issue.

“When deindustrialization happened in the inner city, all the plants closed and crack cocaine came on the scene. In South Central it hit very hard because you had a conver-

PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN LEGISLATURES



ASSEMBLYMAN
BILL MAZE
CALIFORNIA

gence of gangs and drugs and violence. I wanted to see if I could do something about that. I believed you could take a young person, take the normal rebelliousness of adolescence, and redirect that into social change.”

The coalition recruited middle schoolers to work on projects in the community, hoping to turn them away from gangs. The organization also turned to land-use policy, fighting for better code enforcement and for zoning laws that would prevent concentrations of liquor stores, recycling centers, vacant homes and vacant lots, which, she says, created neighborhood havens for drug dealers. Much of the focus was on liquor stores in the community, most of them owned by Korean-Americans.

BongHwan Kim, now general manager of Neighborhood Empowerment for the city of Los Angeles, was director of the Korean Youth and Community Center when he first met Bass. Tensions between the African-American and Korean communities were explosive, especially after a Korean storekeeper shot and killed a young black girl. But Bass, he says, worked hard to build relationships and keep the peace.

“We tried to work to redirect the racial divide and demonstrate to people that it was not so much about race as it was an economic issue,” he says. “I found Karen to be very committed, smart, a good listener, very hard-working.”

Then came the Los Angeles riot of 1992, which Bass refers to as the “civil unrest.” More than 200 liquor stores—most of them Korean-owned—burned down, and Bass and her group fought to limit the number that were allowed to rebuild. She says her campaign prevented the reopening of 150 of the stores, and at least 44 other businesses popped up to replace them.

“We were able to document a reduction in crime where the liquor stores did not rebuild,” she says. “We were able to win a lawsuit that reinforced all cities’ rights to regulate liquor stores.” But, she adds: “We didn’t solve the gang crisis. The Crips and the Bloods still exist.”

FOSTER CARE FOCUS

Her fight against illegal narcotics led Bass to the issue that is now her public policy passion: foster care.

“Crack was profoundly different because it was the first time you had a drug crisis that affected men and women equally,” she says. “It redefined drug treatment. It redefined a whole bunch of things. Families fell apart. With heroin and other drugs, women kept the families intact. When women use drugs all hell breaks loose.”

The result was an explosion of foster care and a whole host of new issues that came along with it. Bass began working on the issue in the community and carried that with her to Sacramento. She worked to ensure

that grandparents who stepped in to care for children would be compensated the same as strangers who did that job. And she tried to get better transition benefits for 18-year-olds who are emancipated from their foster families, since so many of those young people end up homeless and in prison.

Assemblyman Bill Maze, a conservative Republican from California’s Central Valley, shares Bass’s interest in the issue and the two struck up a close, working relationship. Maze even has endorsed her idea of finding \$300 million to \$500 million in additional funding for the program. And he thinks she has the tools to become an excellent speaker.

“She’s developed some pretty good relationships with members across the aisle,” Maze says. “She just has a whole different style of addressing people, how she treats individuals. She’s respectful. She listens. When you are in a conversation she pays attention to what individuals are saying.”

Raphael Sonenshein, a California State University Fullerton political science professor who has followed Bass’s career since her days working on the black-Korean conflict in Los Angeles, sees the same traits. As a community organizer, he says, Bass mastered the art of delegating and empowering others to work toward a common goal.

Some leaders “don’t necessarily act in a dominating, hierarchical style. People mistake that for not being strong enough, until they realize it’s a very different kind of strength,” he says. “I think that’s what Karen brings to the job. For all her talent, she is a very modest person. Very nice, very easy to talk to. A person before being a politician. It can be quite effective. It sometimes comes as a bit of a surprise to people.”

Bass says she is only doing what comes naturally. Her view of the Capitol, and her potential to lead it, has changed quite a bit since her first visit years ago.

“To me this is the best of all worlds,” she said. “I’m paid to do what I would do for free.”