

Silicon Valley grows latest Calif. political class

April 22 2009, By JULIET WILLIAMS , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Silicon Valley, the nation's center of high-tech innovation, is exporting a new kind of product - frustrated former CEOs leaping from the boardroom to politics with promises to return economic luster to the Golden State.

Three Silicon Valley heavyweights are competing for governor next year, and a fourth is considering challenging a powerful Democratic incumbent in the U.S. Senate. All are Republicans, and three have immense personal fortunes that will allow them to mount aggressive campaigns.

"They've already changed the world using technology, and now they want to change the world using policy," said Donnie Fowler, a Democratic political strategist in the valley, the network of suburbs and office parks south of San Francisco that radiates out from San Jose.

It's a reversal of roles for Silicon Valley, which for years has been a favored stop for presidential hopefuls and other candidates from both parties seeking to tap its deep pockets and take on its mantle of hipness and currency.

Among the first to make the switch to the political arena was a Democrat, Steve Westly, an early executive of eBay. He became California's controller in 2002 and ran for the Democratic gubernatorial primary four years later, losing by a narrow margin.

All the leading GOP candidates for governor next year have ties to Silicon Valley - former eBay chief executive Meg Whitman, state Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner, who headed a tech startup, and former Rep. Tom Campbell, a former Stanford business professor who represented the area in Congress for five terms.

Another Republican, former Hewlett-Packard chief executive Carly Fiorina, is considering a challenge to Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer.

Politics already bears the stamp of California's high tech hub. Internet fundraising and social networking were pivotal to President Barack Obama's election. California's Democratic candidates for governor regularly post messages on Facebook, and Whitman uses Twitter.

"I think having changed the game in industry, they see that opportunity that's waiting to change California government," said Jim Wunderman, president of the Bay Area Council, a business group that is urging a reform of state government. "They're salivating at the opportunity to apply some of their own technologies to government."

While the primary election is still more than a year away, the GOP candidates already are maneuvering to gain an advantage with right-wing voters who are looking for traditional conservative values rather than the "achievement over ideology" approach used successfully in Silicon Valley.

Poizner has been trying to win over anti-tax advocates by opposing budget-related measures on California's May 19 special election ballot including Proposition 1A, a measure backed by Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger that would cap state spending but extend higher taxes on sales, income and vehicles.

That's a contrast with attitudes in Silicon Valley, where leaders are more

inclined to see government as a potential partner than an enemy.

Executives there believe their company's success depends on efficient regulation and sound services, said Carl Guardino, president of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which represents nearly 300 businesses.

"That's a mind-bend for some other business interests who don't understand that we don't view 'tax' as a four-letter word," Guardino said. "We don't like them, but we know that we need funding if we're going to have decent transportation and affordable housing and excellent schools and the other services that we need."

Campbell, a former business professor at Stanford and business dean at the University of California, Berkeley, said his Silicon Valley constituents always gave him a fair hearing when he served in Congress, rather than approaching issues ideologically.

"Maybe I was right, maybe I was wrong. But there was no 'Wait a minute, the Republican Party position is X,'" said Campbell, who has since moved to Southern California.

Poizner built his fortune as head of SnapTrack. The small company developed technology that allowed the use of global-positioning chips in cell phones. He sold the company to Qualcomm in 2000 for about \$1 billion.

After leading the state Department of Insurance the past three years, Poizner said he has learned that the boardroom mentality and innovative spirit of [Silicon Valley](#) doesn't always work in a government culture that is used to inertia and negativity.

Whitman echoes that, saying many people tell her they think state

government can't be fixed, or that California is ungovernable.

"I do find myself often being the positive influence and saying 'I think we can do this,'" Whitman said. "There's a fair amount of skepticism and cynicism."

Whitman, who has already contributed \$4 million to her nascent political bid, has asked rhetorically why she would want the governor's job after a career in business that made her a billionaire. Her answer is that she loves her adopted state too much to let it fail.

"And I refuse to sit by and watch it happen," she adds.

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