

# Tech's new love

August 21 2009, By Mike Cassidy

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There was a time in Silicon Valley when the political game was practically sneered upon.

The corporate power players were too busy, too creative, too darn smart to wallow around with those who were practicing and perfecting the brutal sport of politics. This was a meritocracy. The best ideas, the best products, the best people would naturally rise to the top. No help needed from lobbyists and such.

No more.

[Silicon Valley](#) power players are politicians now. You would be forgiven if, for the moment, you're thinking the valley's next New Thing is going to be a governor. By my definition, three of the five major announced gubernatorial candidates are of Silicon Valley.

There's Meg Whitman, formerly of eBay, who looks at the California governor's office and sees a "Buy It Now" tag. And there's Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner, who helped put GPS in our cell phones, and is charting his own course to the governor's mansion. And then there's Tom Campbell, a former congressman, who is not a former tech exec, but who did launch a political career with the backing of the tech industry's biggest names.

And it's not just governors who are in beta here. Consider former Hewlett-Packard [CEO](#) Carly Fiorina, who was briefly a key adviser to presidential contender John McCain and is now leading the list of those

who might take on Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer in 2010.

"I think it's part of an evolutionary change," says Larry Gerston, a [political science](#) professor at San Jose State University.

An evolution marked not just by the candidacies of the three Republicans who will face each other and most likely other big names in the June 2010 gubernatorial primary. But an evolution powered also by a number of steps that have been taken over the years -- trade groups, corporate lobbying operations in Washington and Sacramento, fundraising dinners big and small at high-tech honchos homes.

It's easy to forget it wasn't long ago that playing politics was seen as a distraction in the valley. Gerston remembers when he started at San Jose State in 1974, just three years after the microprocessor was invented at Intel. The tech industry was in its childhood.

"These companies, being small, concerned themselves with just making payroll that week," he says. "They got the product out. They were concerned about promoting the product."

Politics was somebody else's business. Government was irrelevant.

"We're product-driven. We're R&D-driven," Gerston says the thinking was well into the 1980s. "We will compete to produce the best products and people will buy them."

Politics, it seemed, was something not discussed in polite company. When I covered Campbell's first run for Congress 20 years ago, I set about asking his big-name financial backers -- David Packard, Bob Noyce, Apple's John Sculley -- why they were supporting the then-untested candidate. They all declined to be interviewed. It was a classic Silicon Valley endorsement -- money talks so you don't have to.

But even two decades ago, a gradual change was under way. Gerston looks back to the 1978 founding of the Santa Clara Valley Manufacturing Group, an organization Packard promoted as a way for local companies to push for common interests. The organization, now the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, evolved into a force advocating for laws and policies beneficial to its high-tech members.

High-tech executives tested the political waters. Ed Zschau, who founded a Milpitas computer-equipment company, won a congressional seat in 1982. Steve Westly, formerly of eBay, was elected state controller in 2002.

"They get it now," Gerston says. "They get it that there is a connection between what they do, what they need and what government provides."

Paul Saffo, a futurist who's long studied the valley's culture, says the valley's big move into politics in the 1990s and this decade is all part of a region and an industry growing up.

"Silicon Valley 1.0 was all about changing the world with technology first and with good works second," he says. "And in Silicon Valley 2.0, the two were in equal balance. And now it's Silicon Valley 3.0: 'We can take the skills of Silicon Valley and apply them to the larger social, political and economic problems.' "

Saffo sees the simultaneous candidacies of Whitman, Poizner and Campbell as the rise of a new "geeky pragmatism." Whether engineers or not, the three come from a culture, Saffo argues, that embraces practical solutions to complex problems.

It strikes me that it's only natural the valley and the tech industry that defines it would produce personalities ready to run for office. This is a place of big egos and can-do attitudes. It is a place that has proved it can

think different when it comes to life's most vexing challenges. It's a networker's paradise. Oh, and it's a place where corporate winners make buckets of money, which doesn't hurt come campaign time.

This is hardly the beginning of the valley's political awakening, but let's hope it's the end of the thinking that politics just doesn't play here.

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