

ANGRY DELEGATES BLAST GOVERNOR OVER GUN CONTROL

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The explosive nature of the gun-control debate carried the day.

Delegates to the state Republican Party's annual convention Saturday let their emotions run close to the surface with a loud rebuke to Gov. Mike Leavitt on gun-control legislation and also made changes in the way GOP candidates will be chosen for the 2000 elections.

"It's such a hot emotional issue right now," said Hooper delegate Brent Odenwalder, who opposes more gun-control laws. "It's not being handled logically because it's such a hot-button issue."

In a series of thunderous voice votes at Weber State University's Dee Events Center, many among the convention's 1,200 delegates roared their disapproval for Leavitt's announcement that he intends to call a special session of the Legislature this fall to center on gun issues.

And, in a 388-290 vote, conventioners lowered to 60 percent the required minimum of delegate votes needed to secure nomination for statewide office and multicounty legislative seats. The party constitution's threshold until now has been 70 percent; Democrats already have adopted a 60 percent standard, reducing the chance of costly primaries.

Most at the convention, which was poorly attended considering the party has some 5,000 registered delegates, made up the party's dominant right-of-center conservatives. At least a quarter to a third of the delegates, though, were ultra-conservatives who not only complained about the "tyranny" of party leadership but were the most outspoken voices at the convention.

Despite those complaints, GOP Party Chairman Rob Bishop easily won re-election to a second two-year term over long-shot challenger Gerard Arthus by a 947-270 vote. "I was actually expecting to get a lower percentage," Bishop said.

His dual role as a gun lobbyist helped split his opposition; despite their criticism of Bishop's control of the party, ultra-conservatives side with him against more gun controls.

A motion to let Republicans split their convention delegates in the 2000 race for president of the United States failed in a 536-228 vote, just shy of the two-thirds needed to pass.

Sen. Orrin Hatch's colleagues joked as if he would soon announce a bid for president. Hatch listed some reasons why he believes Republicans are superior.

"Let's stand together because our party is the party of what's right. . . . We're not going to lie like they do," he said, in an apparent swipe at the Clinton administration. "We'll never outspend them. . . . We don't have the gays or lesbians with us."

Hatch once said -- and later apologized for saying -- that Democrats are the party of homosexuals and abortion. The other four members of Utah's all-Republican congressional delegation, Sen. Bob Bennett and Reps. Jim Hansen, Chris Cannon and Merrill Cook, also spoke.

Bennett warned against party divisions. "Sometimes we say things to each other in the party that come back to haunt us," he cautioned. "That begins to tear the party apart . . . and opens the door for the Democrats to come back."

Instead, Bennett counseled the GOP to remember that "once a candidate is selected," Republicans would do best to follow "Ronald Reagan's 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican."

Yet even party officials took on Leavitt, who is up for a third term in 2000, for urging the special session.

"To rush to judgment, just for that, to a lot of people seems like hastiness. And hastiness makes for bad policies," said Stephen White of Provo, who was elected the party's vice-chairman in an 802-415 vote over incumbent Cleo Atkin of St. George.

Leavitt said, however, that Republicans should be "the party that acknowledges reality" on gun control.

"Blind people cannot drive. Likewise, those who have serious mental illness should not have guns," he said. "This is one Republican parent that doesn't want to send my children to a school that is protected simply by arming the teachers."

"I do!" came the reply in a loud chorus of shouts.